

THE MANDURA MYSTERY



**Iris
Barry**

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Starlight shimmering upon her granite face, the Stone Woman of Mandura stared impassively at the cliffs, above her surging chasm of death.

What macabre influence resulting in murder and horror did she exert upon the inhabitants of the little coastal village?

Stark Connister, young Real Estate broker on vacation, meets dark-eyed Dolores Dalquist and her father, and finds himself struggling with shadows, peril stalking his steps. He becomes involved with a saturnine professor, a ravishing young widow, an agate shop dealer . . .

Cloaked in fog a deadly phantom prowled the beaches and the paths seeking its prey.

In the ruined hotel among the pines slumbered a strange secret, and up dark Kaneah Canyon a sinister surprise awaited Connister.

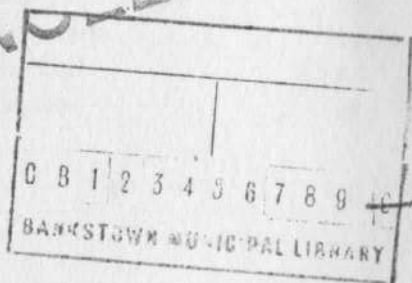
THE MANDURA MYSTERY



by

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CHANCELLED



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FOR JIM AND DAVID

CHAPTER ONE

THE MIST DWELLERS

SUNDAY HAD been clear of fog and Stark Connister had spent most of it beach-combing. With utmost concentration he'd examined odd shapes of driftwood, curious shells, and tucked agates into his pockets. In tidal pools he'd poked starfish of coral and maroon fancifully beaded with pearl, and had watched tiny pink crabs scuttling for shelter under the rocks. He had done it exactly as though he had not repeated the same performance every day, barring a heavy downpour of rain, for three weeks. And while he drifted along he'd meditated on the Grey People.

During his enforced vacation from the city streets, he'd dredged up that name for certain inhabitants of Cape Mandura. Not because they were all either grey or old, but because dwellers of coastal villages seemed like no other people on earth. Cape Mandura was typical. The majority of its residents were exiles from the world, for one reason or another.

They had stepped out of the rush and confusion of urban life; they had closed their pretentious houses in distant cities, locked the doors of their shops and offices, forsaken the activities which had so feverishly engaged them—and sought this curious netherworld of the sea coast.

Here in this remote region where the surf of the blue Pacific pounded a rocky shore, echoing in caverns burrowing under gaunt yellow cliffs, where nature was so vital and tremendous in its force, the contrast with the staid village life was arresting.

He'd come to know most of Mandura's inhabitants enough to discuss the weather, during his period of rest from the hectic

occupation of selling real estate up in Portland. Banished by the doctor to the sea coast to recuperate from a sinister virus engendered by the acute fatigue of three harried vacationless years, he'd almost begun to think of himself as one of the Grey People.

Like them he wandered aimlessly along the shore searching for treasures which the tide might have cast up. He lounged on the cliffs for hours—after finally accepting his weariness—and like the Grey People watched the gulls and stared out to sea. But he knew it was different with him. This was a brief, even welcome interlude in an active life. For them there was no returning. They had closed the doors upon the past. Or had they? What memories of triumphs or regrets stirred behind their lack-lustre eyes?

Today he left the beach early, by the trail that connected with the steep, rutted road winding up past his shingled cottage to the main street. The south-bound bus which stopped only once a day, was due, and he liked to watch it roar into town.

He was late and the huge silver and blue monster, motor rumbling, had already drawn in to the waiting shelter. So rural had he grown that it gave him a thrill to see it. The moment seemed like an event. The bus door swung wide and a spruce young driver sprang down. There must be a passenger, which was unusual so late in the season—nearly the last of September—and on a Sunday evening.

An old fisherman, Eddie Dulin, standing beside him, removed his pipe from his mouth and gave Connister a sharp nudge in the ribs. "By heaven, it's a gal! How's that to liven up the ole town?"

With considerable pleasure Connister regarded a pair of beautifully proportioned legs encased in the sheerest hose, descending the high steps. His eyes moved upward to a narrow black skirt topped by a smart jacket, and finally to the owner's face. In the act of lighting a cigarette he paused, feeling a kind of wonder new to him. The face was lovely, delicately-moulded, the eyes dark and still. Under a small white hat he glimpsed black lustrous hair.

Why had she arrived by bus and not by car? Who was she coming to visit? And what the devil did it matter anyhow? He thrust the cigarette between his lips and moved away.

The girl stood hesitant as the bus roared into life, and with acrid fumes pouring from the exhaust, pulled away from the station. Her eyes flashed from old Eddie, squatting comfortably on an overturned oil drum, to an elderly villager hurrying past. Finally they rested on Connister. She moved towards him.

"Excuse me," the voice was soft, musical. "I—I wonder if you can tell me where I can find the Blue Tides cabin?"

He turned with a smile. "The Blue Tides? Not far from my own cottage. I'm Stark Connister, and I'll be happy to walk along with you."

"Thank you. I'm Dolores Dalquist, from Willamette City," she glanced up and down the nearly deserted boardwalk. "I thought Cape Mandura was a town."

He laughed, reaching for her white travelling case, seeing the village through her eyes. Grocery store, gas-station, miniature post office, and agate shop, all storm-weathered and in need of paint, and across the road several old houses where the shopkeepers dwelt. Beach pine pressed in on all sides. To the east heavily timbered mountains rose precipitously, their green slopes richly burnished now by the westering sun.

"It seems very peaceful," she said.

"It is very, *very* peaceful," he agreed.

"Is the cabin far? I don't see any houses."

"They're buried in the trees. The Blue Tides is at least a quarter of a mile down a gravel road. There's a short cut, but it's too steep for those pretty high heels."

They left the boardwalk and began the descent of the narrow road burrowing down through dense mats of wind-stunted pine. Presently they rounded a bend, the woods fell away, and the girl uttered a cry.

"The sea! How heavenly blue."

His gaze followed hers out behind the grim barrier of rocks to water shimmering azure and translucent jade. Low-lying sunset vapours of lemon and heliotrope dreamed along the horizon. The wind, bearing the tang of the sea and the incense of pine, brushed their faces as softly as the wings of a gull.

Silent a moment they stood watching, and he liked her appreciating the beauty of the scene. In his exile his enjoyment of nature had sharpened considerably.

"You've arrived on a rare day. We've been dwelling in a

shroud of fog. This coastal region apparently goes into oblivion at this time of year."

She gave a blissful sigh as they moved along. "It's wonderful."

"And lonely, especially for a young girl all by herself."

"I'm not seeking excitement, and I'll be alone only one day. My father is arriving Tuesday morning. He's an attorney, but he managed to take a few days off. Do you live down here, Mr. Connister?"

"Heaven forbid. I'm on vacation. And since I arrived I've seen nothing more disruptive to total monotony than Mr. Rocky Nelson, the agate shop owner, being picked up by the State Police for driving intoxicated."

She laughed, undismayed by such tranquillity.

They were back among the pines again, the road dropping steeply under their feet. Presently they came out on a level bench of land, the black boulders and the pounding breakers of the open shore in front of them. To their right stood a green-shuttered house with a picket fence enclosing riotously coloured masses of flowers.

"Civilisation," he announced. "The dwelling of the Reverend Wellsley Jerome and his wife."

"What gorgeous dahlias."

"Certain flowers flourish like weeds in the salt air. Now just ahead where the road fades back into the trees, is my cottage behind its driftwood fence. About two city blocks up beyond is your Blue Tides."

The twisted, witch-dark trees received them again. Elated she tripped ahead of him. "I love everything, especially these little old houses buried in the trees."

"The trees put up stiff resistance to the winds, and believe me, winds can blow down here. Do you have a key?"

She dug into a white handbag and produced one. "The rental agent at home gave it to me. Father took the cabin for ten days."

"How did you happen to pick Cape Mandura for your stay?"

"We've heard of the Chasm of the Stone Woman, and I've always longed to see it, and suddenly father decided to come. Who do these houses with the blue shutters belong to?"

They were passing three grey cottages banked by purple-

flowering bushes. Smoke drifted cheerily from the chimney of the largest house.

"They are the Grier Cottages. In this large one lives my landlady, Mrs. Jennie Grier, a widow. She does everything for me except cook my meals. She's a good woman, but I find it difficult to tolerate the remarkable philosophy of her dead husband. Now we come to the Blue Tides."

She ran ahead of him up the shell path to the steps of the cabin. It was a large one, constructed of logs peeled and varnished, but now darkened by many winters of ocean storms. Eagerly she attempted to peer between the drawn curtains at the windows.

"I shall be cosy here."

When she turned he noticed that the dark eyes were flecked with gold, that her skin had the faintest sheen of gold also, and in her animation she was very lovely indeed. She caught a hint of his admiration and stepped back flushing.

"It was considerate of you to walk down with me."

"I've nothing else in the world to do, and it was a pleasure."

A familiar greyness was beginning to obscure the luminous azure of the day. Under the dull thunder of the surf they could hear moisture dripping from the bright leathery leaves of the tall salah and manzanita bushes pressing in about the cabin. Shadows stirred in the green caves of pine beyond, and a hush profound, strangely ominous, enveloped them. The girl suddenly shivered and thrust the key into the lock of the door.

"It's growing cold. A fire will be wonderful."

"Keep your door locked," he advised her. "There's a guy who wanders around here like a lost ghost. A good guy, named Ford Coburn, but he's been known to frighten people."

"I'll keep it locked. Perhaps," she added shyly, "I'll see you on the beach."

"I'm sure you will. Good night."

She slipped inside, leaving behind her the faintest fragrance of hyacinth.

The sea had turned to lead and a chilling wind strong with the odours of kelp and drenched sand swept over him as he strode back down the road. One window in the Grier house glowed amber and he glimpsed a moving shadow behind the filmy curtains. On impulse, he turned in. The aroma of frying

pork chops greeted him when Mrs. Grier opened the door.

"You're just in time for dinner, Mr. Connister. Shell-beans and chops, even blackberry pie."

It was a friendly kitchen, painted pale yellow, African violets blossoming on the window-sills, a table set for supper under the windows presenting a view far down the southern coastline towards White Bay. The tea kettle was singing on the stove. Connister sniffed the air.

"Thanks, I won't stay for dinner, but I wouldn't refuse a hunk of that delectable-looking pie, if you should insist on offering it to me."

"Well, I insist."

Mrs. Grier was one of the Grey People, but with a difference. Tall, reedy, she fought off the years with make-up applied with a reckless hand. Connister guessed her to be in her late forties. Her short hair was threaded with grey and thick-lensed spectacles all but obscured lively blue eyes. Despite her tendency to quote her departed spouse on the slightest provocation Connister enjoyed her sense of humour and lack of conventionality.

"I've been escorting a new visitor to the Blue Tides." He watched her cut generously into the crusty fragrant pie. "Her name is Dolores Dalquist, and she plans to stay ten days."

Mrs. Grier straightened, knife suspended in mid-air, and gazed suspiciously at him. "Is she—pretty, Stark Connister?"

"How did you guess? She's beautiful: black hair, Latin eyes. But alas, too young for me."

"How ancient are you, and how young is she?"

He sighed. "I doubt if she's twenty, and I'm seven years beyond that."

She raised an eyebrow. "Practically her granddaddy. Isn't it going to be dreadfully depressing up there in that old cabin for a girl alone?"

"Her father is coming down Tuesday."

"Well, that's good." She slipped the wedge of pastry on a plate and draped it with wax paper.

"Where did you scrounge up the berries for that pie, Jennie?"

"Up in the hills near the old Lost Springs Hotel. The vines have nearly buried the place, and the berries hang there in clusters ripe and juicy."

"Fruit of the Gods, Jennie. Thanks." He took his pie and

went off through the gathering dusk to his cottage. At the gate a dark apparition emerging from the shadows floated towards him. From the folds of a black scarf a pallid face gleamed eerily and sunken eyes met his in a lack-lustre stare. A zombi, he decided with a start, then recovered himself.

"Good evening, Mrs. Jerome. How are you today?"

A thin weary voice answered him: "Quite as usual, Mr. Connister, thank you. I'm taking a little stroll to quiet my nerves."

"You should have come out when the sun was shining."

She gathered her sombre garments closer about her. "This is a restful hour, in which to contemplate—and remember." She gave curious emphasis to the last word.

In Jennie Grier's opinion Mrs. Jerome had become slightly obsessed. The Reverend Jerome, Connister had been told, had abandoned his church and congregation to seek seclusion in this remote village, and his wife had never forgiven him.

"You're looking well now, Mr. Connister," she said. "Big men always appear so vigorous. The sea air does grant restored health to some people. It has never done so for me. I saw you pass with a young lady. Is she a friend of yours?"

"A visitor to Mandura. She and her father have taken the Blue Tides cabin."

"Another from the world of sin and indifference." Mrs. Jerome shook her head. "I thought I recognised her, but of course, I was mistaken. Well, I must get on before darkness falls."

In her funereal raiment she paced slowly past him into the twilight. He went on into the cottage and kindled a blaze in the big fireplace which dominated the pine-panelled room he'd found so comfortable, if somewhat old and shabby.

When the flames were crackling he lit the gas plate in the kitchen and opened a can of corned beef hash, and fried some eggs. He rather enjoyed preparing his own meals down here, though he almost never did in the Portland apartment he shared with Walter, his business partner. They usually dined in restaurants, and habitually complained of the food.

He carried plate and coffee cup to the long table under the living-room window where he could watch the tattered curtains of mist floating across the wide latticed panes. He had the

weirdest feeling as sky and sea were blotted out, that he was marooned in a dying world among grey phantoms of the once living. It seemed less like a phantasy than to believe an actual world existed beyond these immeasurable depths of fog, this desolate solitude . . .

Then the vital girl with the black smiling eyes, up at the Blue Tides rose to his mind, and the sense of reality returned and his spirits lightened. He would see to it that they met on the beach tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWO

DEADLY HANDS

A SHIMMERING whiteness pressed the windows when Connister awoke. But it was moving in waves, wind driven, and the possibility of clearing and sunshine cheered him through a leisurely breakfast. A sense of leisure was something he had all but forgotten until the virus attack. Looking back now on the number of feverish hours he and Walter had managed to cram into one day up in the Portland office appalled him.

Poor old Walter was carrying on frenziedly without him, while here on a Monday morning he sipped his coffee and contemplated an empty day ahead.

Determinedly he switched off his guilty thoughts of Walter and the business. He'd make it up to him when he returned. He sprang up, washed his dishes and set out for the grocery.

The sun was working its way through thinning silvery tissues, and the sea was tumultuous amethyst and green, shot with gold. He filled his lungs with winy autumn air.

Mr. Keeney, the grocer, had only one other customer when Connister entered the store. Dolores Dalquist was at the counter. Her slight figure was moulded into black capri pants and a black sweater, and her dark hair sparkled with diamonds of mist. She looked up and gave him a quick smile of recognition.

"Good morning, Mr. Connister, what a glorious day."

"Mandura at its best. But the fog will drift back."

"I hope not because I've looked forward so long to seeing the famous Head."

"Watch out, she can be perilous, can't she, Mr. Keeney?"

The elderly grocer looked up from carefully wrapping a head of lettuce, and nodded sombrely. "She has taken a number of lives over the years."

Connister purchased cigarettes, and was turning to leave when the old-fashioned double door banged open and his landlady, clad in a green plaid blazer over a pink housedress, dashed in.

"I've run out of sugar, Mr. Keeney," she panted, "right in the middle of orange marmalade."

In such an emergency there was no time for social amenities. Connister left without presenting her to the new occupant of the Blue Tides. He went home and got out the car, which he avoided using as much as possible, having discovered that walking was both pleasurable and invigorating, and drove up the coast to White Bay, twenty miles away.

The sign at the edge of the town stated that White Bay possessed a population of six hundred and eighty-nine, but Connister suspected that included dogs and possibly a few cats. It lay between the ocean and the bay, picturesque and peaceful. However, its chief charm for Connister was the barber shop, the drug store, and two good restaurants.

He had his hair cut, drove down to the docks to watch a fleet of fishing boats skim into harbour, had an early lunch, then drove slowly home, enjoying the dramatic beauty of the coast: gigantic black pinnacles of rock thrusting up out of iridescent water. But a dull lavender bank of fog was already standing off on the horizon waiting to move in. He'd better hurry if he wanted to encounter the girl from the Blue Tides on the beach.

By the time he set off mist was already filming the sea. He strolled along inspecting the offerings of the ebbing tide: a few amber jelly-fish, a purple sea urchin, sand dollars . . . Fog was clouding about the Cape, blotting out the massive headland and drifting swiftly with the wind towards him as he sauntered in the direction of the Stone Woman. Presently he was moving through a swathe of white guided only by instinct. He'd have to turn back.

A familiar sound reached his ears: the rattle and rolling of stones off to his right on the cliff side. Someone else was taking an eerie walk in the obscuring vapours. But he moved invisible and unknown.

The dull heavy thunder of surging waters told him he was not far from the perilous Chasm of the Stone Woman. The air now was chilling rapidly and the thought of a pot of hot coffee rose invitingly to his mind. He swung about.

The sudden frantic pounding of footsteps behind him brought him sharply around again. Out of the mist a face emerged. It was whiter than sea foam.

He stood startled as a slim black figure came flying towards him. It was Dolores Dalquist. Abruptly she halted, eyes blind with fear, almost plunging headlong in a violent effort to check her flight.

He sprang towards her. "What on earth is the matter?"

At the sound of his voice she steadied herself with terrific effort. "Somebody—tried to—*kill me!*" Her breath choked in her throat.

"Kill you? But that's preposterous. No one . . ." His eyes strained vainly to penetrate the swirling, baffling white veils beyond her.

Convulsively she clasped her arms across her breast. "I—I was standing on the rocks—overlooking the—chasm . . . Someone rushed at me—pushed me—*hard.*" She gave a little moan. "I fell—*down there*, but a shelf of rock—it caught my heels . . . Then I grasped the rocks . . ."

She held out slim white fingers and they were bleeding. "If—I hadn't landed on the—ledge . . ."

Suddenly she began to back away from him. "Where did you come from?"

"Not from behind you at the Chasm—if that's what you mean. Didn't you see anyone?"

"I—I wasn't looking. Anyone could have come up behind me, the sound of the breakers is so loud—I wouldn't have heard."

She was shaking so violently he reached out and drew her against him. The vision of her plunging headlong into the narrow gorge lined with jagged rock, of being pounded by the furious waters, gave him a decidedly sick feeling.

Gently he took the lacerated hands. They were icy cold. With his handkerchief he wiped them free of blood. "Are you certain you don't know anybody down here?"

"Of course I'm certain, but who would want to push me into that awful place—if I did?" It was a piteous cry.

The question had been inane. There was no use his plunging into that cloud of fog to try and find her attacker. Her clothing was drenched, her lips turning blue.

"You're soaked and freezing. Let me take you to my place and fix you a hot drink."

Her eyes still dark with horror grew wary, and she drew out of his arms. "Thank you, no. I'll—go home."

He had a better idea. "I'll bet my landlady has the tea kettle on. I'll take you to her place before you catch pneumonia."

She allowed him to lead the way up the trail that twisted steeply through wiry webs of pine. A blue plume of smoke was drifting from Mrs. Grier's chimney, and after a brief interval she opened the door to his knock. When she saw the girl, drenched and shivering her eyes widened in astonishment.

"This is Dolores Dalquist, Jennie. She fell on the rocks and was nearly drowned by the breakers. I thought you wouldn't mind letting her dry out before your fire."

"Good heavens, no!" She flung wide the door. "Of course I wouldn't mind. Come right in. You can build up the fire in the living-room, Mr. Connister, while I make some hot tea."

She bustled them into a cheerful room, settled the girl in an old wing-chair close to the hearth, then dashed out to the kitchen.

Connister piled driftwood on the flames while Dolores glanced unseeingly about her, hands clasped to her breast. He could see she was still struggling with her terror.

"What—an interesting room," her voice was shaky.

It was an interesting room: the fireplace was beach rock and along the mantle stood an array of glassware in glowing colours. There were shelves of books, old-fashioned oil paintings on the walls. A cherry cabinet held beautiful old china. Connister had seen beach homes with oriental rugs and rare art treasures, transferred from some luxurious home. But Jennie Grier's carpet was nearly threadbare, and the springs sagged in all her chairs.

She strode in carrying a tray, and poured steaming tea, handing it around sloshing in pink pottery cups. "I even baked chocolate brownies today." She passed a plate of dark rich cakes.

Dolores said faintly: "They look delicious." She accepted one and sipped the tea gratefully.

Mrs. Grier placed the tray on a table and dropped down on a faded tapestry hassock, an incongruous figure against the old-

fashioned background, in her faded brown slacks and salmon-pink sweater. She stirred her tea vigorously.

Connister ate two brownies before he spoke, then he said casually: "You know everyone around here, don't you, Jennie?"

"I suppose I do, but I never pay much attention to the visiting folks. They come and go, unless they stay in my houses several weeks like yourself."

"Is there anyone around here whom you'd consider—well, irresponsible, even vicious?"

The blue eyes behind the heavy distorting glasses went wide and the long sallow face registered shock. "Good heavens, no. There's boys who wouldn't be above dangerous pranks, like Healy Riggs, the gas-station man's son. But the queerest duck around here is probably Mr. Ford Coburn. You've met him. He doesn't conform to what most people consider conventional behaviour; wandering everywhere night and day, rude and unfriendly, though he used to be a college professor, I understand. He can't be much over forty, and I can't imagine why he's here. But I guess he's harmless."

She jerked back to Connister's question. "Why for mercy sakes, do you ask?"

Dolores spoke hesitantly: "I thought—someone pushed me, down there on the rocks—at the Chasm. In the fog, of course, I—I couldn't see . . ." Her voice died away and horror flared again in her eyes. "Perhaps some boy—playing a—a joke."

"A dangerous joke," the older woman cried. "Those rocks are slippery as glass. I don't think Ford Coburn would be guilty of anything like that."

The girl seemed a lot more uncertain about the attack than when she had come flying out of the fog, Connister reflected.

"Best brownies I ever ate, Jennie," he declared. "You're a raving good cook."

"That's one of the things my husband appreciated. He was finicky about food, but he always said my cooking pleased him. Let me pour you some more tea." She gazed concernedly at the girl, sitting so rigidly in the big chair clasping her tea cup. "Are your clothes getting dry, my dear?"

Dolores stirred and set down the cup. A little colour had crept back into the golden cheeks. "They're quite dry, and I do

thank you, Mrs. Grier." She rose and Connister climbed to his feet also.

"Come back again," Jennie Grier urged them at the door. "If you'd like something to read, Miss Dalquist, I have some fine books. I used to be a librarian back in Chicago."

Connister saw Dolores to her cabin. "Cape Mandura is a darned lonely place. If you're frightened again, you know where I am. By the way, you didn't seem so sure someone shoved you when you were talking to Mrs. Grier."

She looked up at him, pushing the dark waves back from her temples. "It—sounded so unbelievable sitting there in that quiet living-room. But someone did try to kill me. I *know*."

The ring of conviction in her voice wiped the smile from his mouth. Yet he still couldn't bring himself to believe an attempt had been made upon her life. She may have lost her footing. Her terror was certainly real enough, and she didn't appear to be a noticeably impressionable girl. On the contrary she was unusually grave for her youth. He'd never forget her flying out of the fog as though death were at her shoulder, and her distraught loveliness had his heart knocking about inside him.

He repeated: "If you are frightened, don't hesitate to call me."

"Father will be here tomorrow. I'll—be all right. Thank you." But the bright mouth quivered.

When he opened the door of his own cottage a lanky figure sprawled in his most comfortable chair, reared up to stare at him.

"Why the devil don't you buy some new magazines, Connister, and switch to a cigarette that doesn't taste like burned straw?"

"Is there any other little thing you'd like, Coburn?"

Ford Coburn's jet-black eyes burning in a dark, gaunt face, regarded him sardonically. He ran long fingers through a shock of grey-threaded hair. "Since you mention it, I could do with a short one, preferably Bourbon."

"Scotch it will have to be, my friend." Connister brought his bottle and a couple of glasses from the kitchen. "I neglected to fill the ice trays, and there's no mixer in the shanty except branch water."

He considered Coburn while they sipped the whisky. Rumour

had it that he'd occupied the Chair of Literature in a southern university a few years back, but a violent, sensational divorce from his wife, and an unpredictable disposition, had terminated his career. How much happened to be the truth he had no idea. The man was erratic. Could he be slipping mentally enough to creep soundlessly up behind a young girl standing on the edge of the Chasm, and identifying her, perhaps, with the wife he had lost, given her a deadly shove?

"Where have you been all afternoon, Coburn?"

His visitor swirled the amber liquid around and around in the heavy tumbler. "Wandering back in the hills. I can't figure why I don't clear out of this God-forgotten place."

"Why don't you?"

"Mild climate, maybe, also it's cheaper to live down here." His tone was evasive.

Connister said casually: "A good-looking girl, Dolores Dalquist, has taken the Blue Tides cabin. Got in last night."

"Dalquist?" The jet eyes snapped open, then went dull again. "Good-looking girls or otherwise leave me considerably less than inflamed." He gulped down the remainder of the whisky, hauled himself out of the chair and lounged to the door.

"Thanks for the drink, Connister."

"Don't mention it. I hope you keep a bottle up at your place."

"Drop in and find out." Coburn opened the door and vanished into the fog.

Connister was hungry. He went out to the kitchen and whipped up some eggs for an omelette and ate them heaped on toast. The fire crackled companionably on the hearth, and he stretched out his long legs to its warmth. All about the cottage he could hear the harsh fingers of the beachpine scraping along the walls, clawing at the panes as the wind began to rise.

Dreamily he beheld Dolores Dalquist's uplifted face, the quivering mouth, and felt the first stirring of the pulse he'd known for a long time. It was pleasant to think of her moving about in that solitary cabin buried in salah.

The house was growing dusky. He roused, lighted a lamp and poked the fire. Coburn had been darned lavish with his supply of fuel. Taking his flashlight he went out to the sagging apology for a shed twenty feet from the house, and gathered an armload of driftwood. Then he snapped off the flash and headed back

towards the kitchen doorway, an oblong of orange light glowing through the fog.

He heard the rustling in the salah crowding the path and caught the glitter of their polished leaves as something moved within them, and he spun around in the direction of the sound.

A ton of bricks crashed down upon his skull, and the oblong of light was abruptly extinguished.

CHAPTER THREE

THE STONE WOMAN

SOMETHING WET and cold was trickling over his face. A beam of light burned through the darkness into his eyes. It shifted, illuminating a greyish face with tight withered lips. Bright, hard eyes like polished agates stared uncertainly down at him.

Connister struggled up and a terrific pounding in the back of his head jarred his brain into memory of what had happened. Anxiously he felt his dripping face.

"Water," said his ghoulish companion, in a peculiarly resonant voice. "I'm afraid I poured a bucketful over you. I was passing and heard you groaning."

"Thanks." Connister climbed shakily to his feet, and groggily surveyed his benefactor—if he was. "You're Reverend Wellsley Jerome, of course. Come on in."

The pastor followed hesitantly. "Did you fall, Mr. Connister, or were you perhaps—drinking?"

"Drinking? Hell, no! Somebody cracked me on the skull." The warmth of the house felt good after his nap on the cold night earth. Suspiciously he peered at the Reverend Jerome. He'd certainly seemed inoffensive enough up to now. A spare man, stoop-shouldered, with a mild, vague manner, and receding brown hair. Definitely one of the Grey People.

"You don't mean," the little man said, "that someone just walked up and struck you?"

"From behind," Connister told him grimly. "I didn't know I knew anyone that well down here."

"But everyone knows you," Jerome pointed out, his face shocked. "Such a small place."

"That means they hate me enough to try to kill me?"

The minister shook his head. "No, no, of course not. I believe your head is cut. There's a little blood."

Connister felt the wound gingerly. "A bit more force and maybe I wouldn't be here now. Must have been a rock or a chunk of wood." He continued to stare at the mild shifting little man edging towards the door. "Why are you living at Mandura, Jerome? Are you really a refugee from the pulpit? You're too young to be retired."

"This seems hardly the moment to discuss the reasons for my altering the pattern of my life, Mr. Connister, but perhaps the blow . . . I don't mind answering your question, however, though you have stated it most weirdly: I am hardly a refugee. I vacated the pulpit of my own accord. To my wife's eternal fury, I may add."

The agate eyes glittered, but he seemed eager to continue. "I discovered belatedly that the rigid protocol of ecclesiastical order was too restrictive for the spirit. Also, people began seriously to distress me. Now I must go."

The tight mouth relaxed slightly. "Here is your flashlight. It was lying beside you. If you like I'll call Doctor Bishop."

"Thanks, no. I'll get to bed and drive up to see him in the morning."

"Then I'll be leaving, if you're quite certain you're all right. My wife will think I took a long time purchasing a quart of milk."

Connister thanked him again, and after the pastor's hurried departure, dizzily administered what first-aid he could to his injured head, wrapped it in a bath towel, swallowed three aspirin tablets and dropped into bed stunned with pain.

Who had attacked him? In a sudden flash he saw Dolores Dalquist flying out of the fog, blind with terror—because *someone had shoved her*, clearly with the murderous intentions of sending her headlong to a frightful death in the Chasm of the Stone Woman. Someone in Mandura was possessed of homicidal mania.

Why suddenly this violence against two strangers? Was there a native in the village who resented strangers to the point that brutal action had finally broken forth? A warped mind released from the restraint of reason?

He lunged painfully out of bed to be sure he'd locked both

doors, and thought again uneasily of the girl alone up there in that old shell of logs buried in foliage.

"A dangerous blow, but no concussion," was Doctor Bishop's verdict, when Connister presented himself at his office in White Bay next morning. "I'd say you were struck with a chunk of rock, luckily not too jagged or you wouldn't be here."

He taped the wound and advised Connister to report the assault to the sheriff's office. "It could have been a fatal blow," he added gravely. "Whoever hit you had vicious intent."

Connister thought about it while he ate breakfast at the Fair Sails Inn. If he got the police in his attacker could be frightened off. Alone he might be able to discover who was responsible for attempted murder by scouting around a couple of days on his own. He drove back to Cape Mandura, left his car at the cottage and walked up to the Blue Tides.

A stunning bronze Lincoln car stood in the lean-to, and when Dolores opened the door to his knock, there was a man at her shoulder.

Her smile was warm. "I'm so glad to see you, Mr. Connister. Father is here and I want you to meet him."

The slender man who confronted him with cordially extended hand was outstandingly handsome, his thick blond hair only slightly touched with grey. He was probably not yet fifty, and had a force of bearing that was impressive and strong personal magnetism. But Connister thought his smile did not quite reach a pair of cold light-grey eyes.

"It was good of you to look out for Dolores." Dalquist's tone was casual. "She seems to think someone attempted to push her into the ocean."

"I'm sure she was right."

"That seems hardly credible. No one here knows the child, and if they did . . ."

Connister felt nettled. "Well, she came very close to drowning in the Chasm."

Dolores suddenly uttered a little cry. "Your head, it's bandaged. What *happened*?"

He smiled grimly. "Somebody attempted to knock my brains out last night."

The colour drained from her face. "I knew—it wasn't my

imagination—someone pushing me.” She gazed bleakly at her father. “Father is inclined to shrug off my—anxieties.”

“Dolores, my dear, you have so many of them, and they are all unfounded.”

She turned quickly back to Connister. “Did you report it to the police? There must be authorities around here.”

“The County Sheriff has headquarters in White Bay, but I’m going to scout around a little on my own. There could be some psychotic guy who’s decided summer people are his poison, for I can’t see any possible connection between the attempt on your life yesterday, and the attack on me last night.”

“Of course not.” Dalquist gnawed his lip. “I don’t like this, yet it seems to me someone must have accidentally bumped into Dolores last night.” He strode across the room and stared from the window shaking his head. “I’d hate to get the police in . . . And I didn’t want to come down here in the first place.”

The girl’s eyes met Connister’s. “Father dislikes the sea coast, but he suddenly decided to come down because I’ve wanted so long to spend a few days away from town.”

She hesitated painfully. “I’m afraid it isn’t going to be very restful.”

Her father swung back to face them. “We can telephone Joanne, and drive home tomorrow morning.”

“Father, *no*.” There was such bitter disappointment in the soft voice that a whole lifetime of pent-up loneliness and frustration was conveyed to Connister.

“Well, we’ll see my dear. It isn’t reasonable to believe any actual danger exists here.”

“It’s become reasonable now,” Connister told him curtly.

Dalquist crushed out his cigarette in a shell on the table, frowning. “At least we’ll wait until Joanne arrives.” He lifted the handsome eyes to Connister. “Glad to have met you. I understand from Dolores that you have been down here two or three weeks. You’re in Real Estate up in Portland?”

“That’s right.”

“Have you seen anyone about whom, in your estimation, could be even slightly deranged?”

“The meanest man I’ve met is Rocky Nelson, the agate shop owner, and he appears to be ugly only when he’s had too much to drink. Best-natured guy in the world when he’s sober.”

"Rocky Nelson." Dalquist moved thoughtfully away.

Dolores walked with Connister out into the brilliant sunshine. A fresh breeze stirred the dark tendrils of hair about her face and provocatively lifted the pale silk of the morning coat she was wearing, now revealing, now concealing very lovely limbs. "Thank you for stopping by, Mr. Connister."

"Make it Stark. Formality shouldn't exist in this big lonely world."

A smile crept into the grave eyes. "Stark, then. I—I feel terribly worried about you."

"I'm on guard now," he assured her. "And you're safe with your father here."

She nodded, but her face did not brighten. "It's wonderful to have him with me for a little while—just the two of us."

"Who is Joanne?"

"My stepmother." Her voice was colourless.

As he strode off he decided that Dolores Dalquist was anything but a happy girl. Why not? Young, beautiful, daughter of a patently successful lawyer . . . She ought to be happy.

Mrs. Grier was vigorously sweeping out his cabin when he got back. She dropped her broom and stared at him, mouth ajar. "Wellsley Jerome wasn't mistaken. Somebody actually did hit you. This is terrible, simply *terrible*."

"With all my heart I agree with you, Jennie."

Unfortunately, it was not his injury to which she was referring. "If it gets around—that people are being attacked, no one will come to Mandura, and my two other cottages will stand there *empty*, Mr. Connister."

"The summer season is over anyway," he comforted her. "And I'm still here—by a miracle."

"But people enjoy the sea coast in autumn, and over the week-end I'm usually filled up. Thank goodness this is only Tuesday."

"I wouldn't like being knocked over the head any better on Saturday."

She reached absently for her fallen broom. "No, no, of course not. There's that nice girl up in the Blue Tides you brought to my house, and I see there's a big handsome car up there today. If they hear of this attack on you . . ."

"They already know of it. I just came from there. The car

belongs to the girl's father, and they're probably staying on, so I wouldn't worry too much about your houses, Jennie."

"Who *could* have struck you? Maybe somebody who'd been drinking."

Connister dropped down on a kitchen chair. "How well do you know the Reverend Wellsley Jerome, Jennie?"

She began without animation to sweep. "He came here—let me see . . . I've been here five years. I came down from Green Falls up in Washington. I was working up there in the library after I came out from Chicago. Green Falls is a commercial town, all lumber, no cultural life, but I had to get away from Chicago. I lived in several cities after I lost my poor husband, I . . ."

With considerable effort Connister brought her back to the present. The Grey People fed upon the past, they had frequently to be called back to this moment in time. "How long did you say Jerome had been here?"

"Reverend Jerome? Oh, he's a good man. He's lived here maybe three years. Yes, he came down the third winter I was here. He doesn't like people very well, says he gave up preaching because the congregation began to get under his skin, started to have dreams about destroying them. He lives now only for those dahlias he grows in his yard."

She swept the dust into a neat pile, bent and scooped it into a yellow dust pan. "He does seem a bit queer, but he wouldn't hurt a fly. His life isn't any too easy now though. Evelyn, his wife, can't forgive him for leaving the church. She's a bitter woman, I can tell you. There, your floor's clean again."

The Reverend Jerome, Connister decided, would bear watching.

"I think some young hoodlum from up the coast must have come down here to stir up excitement." Mrs. Grier spoke hopefully, fastening the buttons of her grey sweater. "I've had every cabin occupied this summer. The weather's been good, so they come. It takes a lot of money to keep up these places in a damp climate like the sea coast."

She stared at him earnestly through the thick lenses of her glasses, the long sallow face sharp with anxiety. "I don't know what I'd do if I lost my cottages."

He said thoughtfully: "It could be some young punks

slipping down here from White Bay or Northport."

"I can't help but worry, Mr. Connister. I planned, and saved and finally scraped up enough money to buy the houses. They were run down but I had them put in shape. My husband always said property was a wise investment."

"Why did you choose Cape Mandura, Jennie?"

"Because of the Chasm of the Stone Woman. She's a great tourist attraction. Well, I must get back to my own kitchen."

After she had gone he walked outside and thoughtfully retraced his steps of the night before. The wood still lay scattered near the shed where it had fallen from his arms. He searched the ground on either side of the plank walk for footprints, or any object which might have been used to knock him out, such as a heavy stick or fragment of rock.

Beneath the dense mats of *salah* the earth was carpeted with numberless layers of copper-coloured leaves that would show no footprint. A few patches of bracken spread their yellowing lace beside the walk, and he noticed that several of the thick fibrous stems were broken—if that indicated anything.

The black lustrous rock peculiar to the region lay in scattered clumps here and there. None close at hand showed stains which might be blood. To examine each stone was obviously impossible.

He returned to the house, and after lunch took the trail through the pines down to the beach. The tide was ebbing and the wet sand reflected the luminous sapphire of the sky, but a penetrating wind crept down his jacket collar as he strode over the rocks, the gulls circling and floating above him, their thin eerie cries breaking the illimitable silence of sky and sea.

Approaching the Stone Woman he gazed up with quickened interest at the awesome image which the ancient sea had crudely sculptured from the living rock.

A sweep of shoulder, graceful neck and an uplifted head thrust up out of the churning waters which surged into a narrow cut between massive boulders. They were uncannily like that of a woman with dark brown hair and impassive features. Breakers thundering in like maddened sea creatures struggling to escape dashed high in white fury about the black glistening figure. She was that realistic that Connister felt his scalp prickle as it always did when he gazed upon her.

On days of storm, people drove miles to gaze at her, to watch

the wild sea crashing about her. Sacrifices had been made to her. A fisherman had slipped from the wet rocks and been pounded to death while the Stone Woman stared indifferently at the gaunt yellow cliffs. Two others had vanished on a night of fog when they approached the Chasm, and tales of still other victims were related by old timers in Mandura.

Could it be that someone for a mysterious purpose of his own was playing upon the sinister reputation of the Head, making Mandura appear to be a perilous, haunted place? A psycho maybe.

He shuddered thinking of Dolores poised there unsuspectingly in the shrouding fog, and staring down, he saw the narrow ledge which had caught her heels and saved her from plunging to her death. Sudden rage shook him. *Who was the person who had pushed her?*

If there was anyone in town who might be aware of a queer streak in one of Mandura's inhabitants, it could be Rocky Nelson, in his agate shop, or Mr. Keeney, the grocer. Connister turned and headed for the agate shop.

CHAPTER FOUR

SHADOW OF VIOLENCE

ROCKY NELSON'S shop was painted a shrieking magenta. All it needed was lace at the windows, Connister thought, and a billowy blonde on the doorstep to pass for a gay nineties brothel. But Rocky was proud of the colour. "Livens up this dead town."

The show windows, however, displayed polished agates translucent as sea water, white branches of coral, star fish, shells opalescent pink, green glass fishing floats escaped from their nets on some far Japanese shore to be washed up five thousand miles away. Over all lay a delicate film of dust.

Rocky was glumly tidying a tray of agate rings when Connister entered. Short, thick-bodied, partially bald, but nattily attired in a green-striped shirt, Mr. Nelson was assertively not one of the Grey People. "Hi," he greeted.

"Wonderful day," said Connister. "Have you any new specimens, Rocky?"

The man picked up a rock polished to show a marbling of blue quartz. "How's this?" His pale eyes under thick puffy lids regarded Connister's head curiously. "How's your noggin? Heard somebody took a crack at you."

"News gets mysteriously around. I've still got the devil of a headache, thanks. I've also got a fierce hankering to find the bruiser who slugged me."

"Don't blame you." There was a hint of animation in the heavy florid face.

Connister picked up a float and turned it slowly in his hands, watching the light melt into its green depths. "Rocky, who around here wouldn't mind knocking someone's brains out? You know everyone in Mandura."

Rocky leaned his elbows on the counter and gazed stolidly

through the dusty windows at the weathered houses across the street.

"Well, that Coburn's a screwball. Everybody walks down here, but you meet this guy walking night and day. I'm back on the ridge hunting, and blamed if Coburn don't crash out of the brush. 'You damned fool,' I yells at him, 'if you know how close you come to getting your head shot off.' What's he doin' here? He ain't workin', and he's too young to be retired. God knows I wouldn't be sticking around this burg if I didn't have a good business here. Maybe *he* conked you."

"For what reason? He's only known me three weeks, and the only thing he has against me, is my failure to stock up on Bourbon instead of Scotch."

Rocky's cold little eyes blinked at him, and he jerked his thumb towards one of the houses across the street. "Maybe my kid assistant, Healy Riggs, was trying to stir up a little excitement. For him this town is buried, man, buried."

"Healy? The gas-station man's son?"

"That's right. He's seventeen. Helps me boil out the star fish and tends shop for me when I go out. Healy's old man keeps him right at hand to help out in the station when he ain't workin' for me. And this dump is a bloomin' graveyard to Healy."

His readiness to cast suspicion on a seventeen-year-old boy was an endearing facet to Rocky's character. Connister had seen Healy, a restless, good-looking lad. He might conceivably strike Connister down, but to attempt to drown a beautiful young girl would certainly indicate a boredom pathological.

Suddenly Rocky said, an odd note in his voice: "Did you see the dame who settled in at the Blue Tides? Man, has she got what it takes to send *me*."

"I've met her," Connister said tersely. "Here, I'll take this amber float."

"That'll be one buck."

Connister laid the money on the counter. "Business will be pretty slow with you from now until Spring, I imagine." The agate shop couldn't be too profitable at that.

"Oh, trade drops off, but there's tourists always passing from California, and the dull season gives me time to hunt specimens and polish agates. I keep goin'."

Connister tucked the float under his arm and headed for the door.

Rocky called jovially after him: "If I hear of anyone who hates your guts I'll let you know."

Sweet guy!

Mr. Keeney, the grocer, also expressed concern, or at least registered interest in Connister's injury, and he suspected it was in his establishment that the news had so rapidly entered circulation.

"Accidents are always happening to summer visitors," Mr. Keeney deplored, shaking his head. He was a stringy man with a long nose and sparse hair. Mrs. Grier could never speak highly enough of him.

"Really dependable person. If Mr. Keeney says his cheese is too strong for my taste, it's too *strong*. He's never deceived me yet."

"What do you mean accidents are always happening to visitors?" Connister felt the subject worth following up.

Mr. Keeney continued deliberately unpacking cans of apricots. "They get caught by the tide, break their legs on the rocks, lose their children, get dangerous cases of sunburn, and nearly drown trying to swim on a beach plainly marked 'dangerous'."

He smiled patiently. "They also nearly burn up the town several times a season with their candles when the electric lights fail, which is all too often down here, I'm afraid. Is there something you'd like, Mr. Connister?"

"Maybe I ought to think about dinner. A can of beans and one of those lemon cream pies."

Mr. Keeney shook his head. "I doubt if you will survive your vacation, eating the way you do."

Neatly balancing the pie and carrying the rest of his purchases he sauntered back towards the cottage. Halfway there he met Jennie Grier in one of the startling costumes she affected; a pair of black boots, blue levis and a Kelly-green sweater. She nodded approvingly at his packages.

"So many of our summer people drive to White Bay for their meals. That's pure laziness, and how can poor Mr. Keeney make a living that way?"

They parted and he jogged on hoping to catch a glimpse of Dolores Dalquist. However it was after five o'clock when he

happened to glance up from his reading by the window and saw her. She was in the Lincoln beside her father. Driving up to White Bay for dinner, he surmised. She saw him and waved, and Dalquist nodded his handsome blond head.

His own head still felt too heavy for his neck, and though the fog held off and the sun went down in a clear saffron sky, he remained in the cottage, smoking and reading.

Just before dark he went out and sensibly brought in what wood he would need for his fire. He also locked both doors before turning in and laid a short length of iron pipe handily alongside his pillow. The night was uneventful.

His head felt better when he awoke, and he spent the morning down on the sunlit rocks beside old Eddie Dulin, fishing in companionable silence. He caught two sea trout and gave them to Eddie.

"Thanky, just ain't my day for fishin', and I was hankering for some fried right crispy tonight."

Later in the day Dolores and her father passed him on the rocks. The latter looked a good deal less than enchanted by the outing. Probably nature was not one of his great passions. They were headed for the Stone Woman and undoubtedly Dolores would again relate her terrible experience there.

Connister was repairing breaks in his driftwood fence when they returned. Dalquist grimaced. "The fog appears to be about to bury us again. How anyone can enjoy this dismal region . . ." He looked chilled and irritable.

Connister smiled. "I guess you have to have a feeling for it in your blood."

Dolores said: "Mrs. Jerome invited me to come and see her dahlias when I met her in the store this morning. Father is going to take a rest." She paused, dark eyes shy. "Would you care to come along?"

He abandoned his fence repair. "Nothing I'd like better this dull afternoon."

Dalquist nodded casually and strode on, and Dolores and Connister set off in the opposite direction.

"Did you really want to come, Stark?"

"I adore dahlias," he assured her fervently.

She eyed him suspiciously. "I don't think you even know what a dahlia is."

Hastily he consulted his meagre botany. "They're something like sunflowers."

She giggled. "You couldn't tell one from a sweet pea."

The Reverend Jerome was not at home. He had driven to White Bay to have an aching tooth inspected, Mrs. Jerome explained at some length, as she led them out to her sea-ledge garden.

Rich masses of heavy-headed flowers greeted them. In the moist air they flourished with tropical luxuriance, and even Connister was impressed with the oriental splendour of their colours, royal purple, rose, sunbursts of gold . . . The older woman said:

"Here is a very special one."

"I'm not sure I like it," Dolores exclaimed.

They studied a great garnet blossom, its silken petals shaded with black.

"That's my Black Warning," said Mrs. Jerome. "One of the very rare black dahlias."

"It sounds sinister," Connister observed.

Mrs. Jerome looked less like a zombi in the silvery afternoon light. "Flowers never fail you," she assured them solemnly. "They are pure, free from the evil of human nature. They will not grow for everyone."

She bent and cut some of the dark flowers and laid them in Dolores' arms. "My Black Warning."

The girl stared down almost fearfully at the shimmering sombre petals. "It's very kind of you . . ."

The fog had swept inshore and was blowing coldly about them. Out beyond the white line of surf the sea had darkened to steel.

"We had better go." Connister turned towards the gate.

They thanked the woman, and when they were out of earshot Dolores said: "It's ridiculous of me, but these flowers seem as you said—sinister. Stark, see how imaginative I've become."

Connister was asking himself if there could be any ulterior motive in Mrs. Jerome's invitation to Dolores to visit her garden, then presenting her with a flower called Black Warning. The idea seemed fantastic, but somewhere in Mandura lurked someone with murder in his heart. That was not fantastic.

He smiled reassuringly at the girl. "Mrs. Jerome meant to



offer you a special favour, I'm sure, presenting her prize blossom to you. I wouldn't worry."

"I won't, because we're leaving tomorrow. Father dislikes it so much down here that he refuses to stay on."

"*Leaving?*" To his surprise he felt acute dismay.

She nodded. "My stepmother was driving down tomorrow. She had social engagements in town she couldn't break, or she would have come with father. He's certain Joanne won't like it here either. He's been—terribly irritable ever since he arrived. He paces the floor and isn't in the least interested in the lovely scenery."

"He's undoubtedly worried about what happened to you."

She shook her head. "He doesn't—worry about me. Father and I have never been—well, pals. I've tried hard, but he's a very important attorney and his practice is growing more demanding all the time. And naturally Joanne requires what little attention he has to give..."

"How long have you had a stepmother?"

"Eight years, ever since I was eleven. My own mother—died."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged, but the lovely face was bleak. "I never knew her. She and father separated when I was three years old. I've been raised by baby-sitters and housekeepers. I was a little happier when I went away to college, but I want to be independent so I left college. When I go back to Willamette City I'll be teaching ballet. I've studied dancing since I was a child."

A lonely, unhappy girl who felt rejected . . . It explained the grave eyes, the desolate air. Dalquist appeared to be the type of man who would concentrate not so much on making money as achieving power and prestige. A man who would be likely to be bored with family life.

"Perhaps I'll see you after I return to Portland," he suggested.

"It's only seventy miles down the valley."

"I'd like that very much," she lifted glowing eyes.

"This fog is getting creepy."

She shivered. "I—hate the fog—after Monday."

"I'm wary of it myself now."

Far out beyond the breakers they could still see patches of transparent azure sky, and clouds suffused with gold, but vapours

were clouding over, and ahead and behind them as they walked, silently folding in.

She moved against him and he liked her nearness, but his eyes were alert for any moving shadow. "In the morning I'm driving to White Bay," he said, "to report these attacks to the sheriff. I'm no detective and it may be dangerous to drift along."

"I'm sure you're right, Stark. I'll see you before we go—to say good-bye."

He left her when she had the cabin door open, and strode back down through the spidery arms of the pines. It was only five o'clock, but he kindled a fire and prepared dinner, with a keen appetite. After the meal he took his coffee to the window.

The Cape had long since been blotted out and the Grier houses, the timbered cliffs, lost in mist. But the wind was drifting it here and there and would probably prevent it settling into an opaque mass. He felt suddenly depressed. Was it because a girl he had known only a couple of days was leaving? It might be a relief to get back to selling houses again.

He dropped into the big chair, stretched out his legs to the fire and was half asleep when a sound pounding above the roll of the breakers, jerked him to his feet. It was the beat of running steps. They stumbled upon the porch.

In two strides he had crossed the room and flung open the door.

Out of the mist floated a face sheened with gold from the light of the doorway. Connister reached out. "Great heavens, child, have you seen a ghost?"

He drew Dolores into the room.

"Stark, I'm terribly worried about father."

"Is he ill?"

She shook her head. "He wasn't in the cabin when I returned from Mrs. Jerome's, and he hasn't come home yet."

He glanced at his watch. "That's nearly two hours ago."

"And it's almost dark." Her voice was ragged. "If he went for a walk—and I can't imagine father walking anywhere—he didn't wear his windbreaker. All his clothing is in the cottage, and the car is there."

A violent trembling seized her, and he drew her against him. "He may have got bored enough, however, to take a hike up

the beach—and perhaps got caught by the tide. That happens to people every little while. The rocks cut off their escape. It's flood tide now, but he'd be safe enough for a time. I'll get a jacket. I know most of the tide traps within walking distance."

He found a bulky sweater, came back and folded it around her. "You'll get a chill in that thin dress." A lovely dress, or was it a housecoat? Palest rose with a soft bow at the throat. It made her look luscious. With an effort he averted his eyes from the tremulous red mouth and turned his thoughts upon Charles Dalquist.

"We'd better get down to the beach first. Later we can look in the other places, the store and gas-station. Are you sure your father doesn't know anyone down here?"

"No one at all, Stark."

There was a little daylight left, a metallic blueness glowing behind the fog. They ran down in the rising wind through thrashing branches to the shore, desolate now as the cold reaches of the moon. They could see perhaps a hundred feet ahead of them though the blue was swiftly ebbing.

"Keep your eyes and ears open," he cautioned. "We've both discovered how deadly Mandura can be."

Her voice was a little moan. "Oh, I pray it hasn't been deadly for my father."

"There's no point in going south," he decided. "That's sand beach and dunes. The traps are beyond the Chasm."

Presently the muffled thunder of imprisoned waters told them they were nearing the Stone Woman. Dolores caught his arm, and he could feel the quivering of her slender body. Warily they approached the Chasm. The air was colder here, holding a kind of deathly chill. The furious waters flashed iridescent as they dashed upward swirling a glittering lace about the massive head.

He halted. "I can't let you go any farther. I'll go on alone. There are two places a quarter of a mile down, with a couple of bad spots in between. You'd better wait here."

"Stark, I *won't* stay here alone. I can't—just *stand* here—waiting. Please let me come with you."

He realised how impossible waiting would be. "All right, but we'll take it slow. Watch your step."

Cautiously they moved forward across the spray-glazed rocks, spume cold on their faces. "I can't believe Father would ever go

past the Chasm," she protested. "He hates the rocks."

An instant later a dreadful sound—half scream, half sob, broke from the girl's lips.

"Stark—O my God!"

With one swift motion Connister jerked her back. She fought him, attempting to plunge forward, but he dragged her against him with brutal strength.

"Don't *move*," he ordered.

CHAPTER FIVE

HORROR ON THE ROCKS

THE WIND surged about them with chill insistence as they stood petrified, staring . . .

Perhaps twenty yards from the mouth of the Chasm a figure lay sprawled grotesquely face down. The head rested in a welter of blood.

Dolores struggled frenziedly in his arms. "Let me go— It's a man . . . it's—*father*."

"Yes." Connister's tone was loud and harsh to command her attention. "Now turn around and wait here for me. Then we'll both go for help. It may not be too late."

She went limp and he turned her about and she clasped both hands tightly to her mouth and stood obediently, eyes closed.

Cautiously he made his way across the slippery boulders and bent over Dalquist. Help would do him no good. He was as dead as anyone he'd ever seen in Korea. The lawyer's body lay in a rubble of loose yellow clay, fresh clay. Connister's eyes travelled back and upwards through the curtains of mist to where high above a section of cliff had recently broken away leaving the roots of shrubs and plants dangling in space.

The man must have been standing at the extreme outer shell of the cliff—a perilous place to stand—and the crust of earth given way beneath his feet.

He bent closer. The dead man wore no coat. He was clad in brown slacks and an expensive gold knit sports shirt. It seemed odd that he had come out in the sharp air without a jacket.

As he stepped back his heel crushed down on something spongy and yielding. He reached down and picked up what appeared to be a fragment of rubber from a beach shoe, and

thrust out his hand to toss it away. Then his fingers tightened over the object. Any violent death would come under investigation. He looked at Dalquist's feet. They were encased in fawn-coloured chukka boots with cork soles. The fragment might have lain there for weeks, then again it might not. He slipped it into his pocket.

Dolores was still standing rigid back to him, hands covering her face. He put his arms about her and she whirled and clutched him in heart-touching dependency.

"Is—he . . .?"

"Yes, now don't think of *anything* at the moment, Dolores. Absolutely nothing." He got her started down the beach, stumbling, half fainting.

"We'll get to a telephone. There's only two in the town, at the gas-station and the post office. The gas-station is sure to be open. I'll call the sheriff."

She jerked to a halt. "The sheriff? But surely the doctor might . . .?"

"The sheriff will bring the doctor, but it's too late. Your father tumbled off a seventy-five foot cliff."

Her face blanched a shade whiter and she stared at him, eyes glazed with shock. "How could he—have fallen? Father strolled about looking at—scenery . . . and in this fog . . ."

"That's for the sheriff to figure out."

They began to run.

At the gas-station he talked over the telephone to a deputy in the sheriff's office. The officer ordered him to remain beside Charles Dalquist's body until they arrived. Something he had no intention of doing, with a shock-paralysed girl on his hands. It was the living that mattered.

Mr. Riggs, the station owner, walked into the office, from his garage. The door had been ajar and he had heard, of course. "Something bad has happened?"

"Miss Dalquist's father has fallen over the cliff, Mr. Riggs. Keep it quiet until the doctor and the sheriff get here, won't you?"

"The *police*?" His eyes bulged in his hawk-thin face, and he turned to gaze at Dolores braced against the door frame frozen in a nightmare. "Why the police?"

"Because Mr. Dalquist is dead." He led the girl from the

station and guided her down the steep trail through the mist-shrouded woods where they were less likely to meet anyone.

He settled her in the big chair by his fire and poured her a stiff drink of whisky. She drank it down like a child, choking as the fiery fluid stung her throat, but she made no protest.

"Someone tried to kill me," she whispered. "Someone tried to kill you. And now—father . . . why . . . *why*—if it wasn't an accident?"

"It must have been an accident." But he was thinking of the frightful wound in Dalquist's skull. He added grimly: "I'm not going to let you out of my sight until your stepmother arrives."

She started. "*Joanne!* I'll—I'll have to let her know." She closed her eyes.

"Not now." She crumpled in her chair and he anxiously massaged her wrists, murmuring soothingly until a little colour seeped back into the white lips. He built up the fire and she lay there watching him unseeingly.

It was an eternity listening for the throb of a motor, but at last it came, accompanied by the grinding of tyres in the sand. Quick, hard footsteps echoed on the porch.

The lengthy wait was explained when the sheriff and his deputy stepped in. They had gone directly to the Chasm where the sheriff had stationed a State Trooper to wait for the ambulance and Doctor Bishop, general physician and coroner, from White Bay.

The older man introduced himself: "I'm Sheriff Ridell, and this is my deputy, Scott Howard. Are you Stark Connister, the man who called in?"

Connister nodded.

"You were ordered to remain at the scene of the accident."

Connister motioned to Dolores. "This is Charles Dalquist's daughter. She needed assistance—badly."

The sheriff allowed the explanation to pass, but he didn't like it. He was a man probably somewhere in his early forties, looking like an ordinary business man in his Oxford-grey suit and soft hat. He had a pleasant, reasonable voice, but Connister suspected the well-cut features could harden to iron, and he was certain the quiet hazel gaze missed nothing worth noticing. He walked over to Dolores.

"We'll want to ask you a few questions later, Miss Dalquist."

His voice was gentle. "I understand your father was a prominent attorney in Willamette City."

She nodded mutely, and he swung about to Connister. "How did it happen?"

"We have no idea. Dolores was worried because her father failed to return home, and came down to me. I thought it possible he might have been caught by the tide, and we went out to search for him." He told about finding the lawyer's body.

The sheriff listened intently, then he said slowly: "It appears to be more than an accident. Looks as though someone struck him on the head. Coroner Bishop will have more to tell us after his examination. I'll talk to you later, so please remain here."

Dolores struggled to her feet. "Do—you mean that—someone—attacked my father? That it wasn't—an *accident*?"

Ridell said: "Oh, he fell off the cliff all right. But there was a wound in the back of his head . . ." He interrupted himself. "Where is your mother, Miss Dalquist?"

"My stepmother. She is still in Willamette City. She was planning to drive down tomorrow."

"You'd better telephone her to come at once. What is your address and telephone number in the city?"

She gave them automatically. "Crystal Towers, Laurel Terrace 300. The exchange is Murdock 7-8930."

"Thank you. We will see you later."

When he had gone Connister took Dolores back to the gas-station where she put in a long distance call to the Crystal Towers. There was no response. She gave the operator instructions to call at ten minute intervals, and they waited an interminable hour.

"We may as well go back to the cottage," Connister decided finally. He was gravely worried about the girl. She appeared on the point of collapse. She went back with him gratefully.

He kept her by the fire. They could hear cars coming and going, and shrill excited voices. She was mercifully spared, however, seeing the police floodlights illuminating the beach. He tried to divert her thoughts.

"Where do you think your stepmother can be?"

She shivered, huddling down deeper into the big chair. "Anywhere, a cocktail party, a night club, with friends. Joanne doesn't keep conventional hours."

"Well, we'll try a little later to reach her." He knew the sheriff's office would try also.

Neither of them were aware when they bore Charles Dalquist away.

This was heyday for the Grey People, an event to rouse them from their dull apathy.

Shortly after the lights had been extinguished on the rocks, there was a knock on the door. He opened it on a taut figure wrapped in an old green coat. It was Jennie Grier. She held a covered plate in shaking hands.

"Tuna sandwiches, Mr. Connister. I'm sure neither you nor that poor girl have had a bite of food. I'll make a pot of hot tea. I was right in the middle of blackberry jam—and I just left it. The whole town's out, I guess."

She was shivering with excitement as she peered over at Dolores, and placed the sandwiches on the table. "Hot piping tea is what you need."

"I don't know how to thank you, Jennie."

"At a time like this no one needs thanks." She marched out to the kitchen, and presently the fragrance of fresh tea floated through the house. She brought plates and cups to the long table. "It will be good for you to come to the table, Miss Dalquist."

Dolores rose obediently and walked over to sit beside Connister. She made a valiant attempt to sip the hot drink.

Jennie Grier dropped down across from them and stared concernedly at the girl. "You can't stay in that cabin up there all alone. I'll be glad to have you come in with me for as long as you'd need to."

Dolores struggled for composure. "My stepmother—will be coming as soon as I can reach her, Mrs. Grier. I—I couldn't rest anyway. I'll just wait here, if Mr. Connister doesn't mind."

"You know I don't mind."

"Your stepmother? Oh, that's much better to have someone close," the older woman said with relief. The blue glitter of her eyes behind the thick glasses betrayed how much she was longing to ask questions. However, she sternly refrained. Instead, she said anxiously with what appeared to be unexpected callousness, though Connister knew it was not:

"I do hope—this unfortunate accident won't make any difference in my renting my cabins. People might be frightened away. You—you're not going to leave, Mr. Connister?"

"No, Jennie. I'll finish out my month."

The older woman climbed to her feet, her manner determinedly bright, and began to clear away the dishes. Her long face, bereft of its rouge looked waxen in the lamplight. "Well, I—I hope it doesn't ruin my business. And now my dear," she smiled at the girl, "you need a sedative. Do you have aspirin, Mr. Connister?"

Dolores lifted her head, shaking aside the silken black shawl of hair which had been veiling her face. "It was very good of you to come, Mrs. Grier."

Connister could see the quivering of the slim fingers gripping her cup as though she must hold tight to something.

"It shouldn't take my stepmother more than two hours of fast driving to reach Mandura."

"Well, just so long as you're not alone."

Connister brought aspirin and a glass of water, and Dolores accepted the white tablets dumbly. He slipped the bottle into his pocket, and his fingers encountered the fragment of rubber he'd picked up beside Dalquist's body. His eyes went instinctively to Jennie Grier's feet. They were large, and they were encased in a pair of grey duck shoes crusted with salt and stained with seaweed, like his own and all the other shoes of those who wandered the beaches. He determined to have a look at Ford Coburn's shoes in the morning, while he told himself he'd been reading too much mystery fiction.

"If you want anything," Jennie told him earnestly, "just call me." She pulled on her long green coat and set forth into the fog.

At eleven o'clock they were still trying to reach Mrs. Dalquist. Mr. Riggs was nodding in his chair in a corner of the station office, despite all the excitement. At last reluctantly, Dolores called a friend of her stepmother's, a Mrs. Talman.

Yes, Joanne had been there that day around noon, Mrs. Talman said, and added: "She said she was leaving for Cape Mandura in a little while, Dolores, to join you and your father. Is anything wrong?"

"My father has been killed," Dolores told her tonelessly.

"Joanne should have been here long ago, if she left shortly after twelve o'clock. Thank you, Mrs. Talman."

She hung up then, unequal to answering Mrs. Talman's shocked inquiries.

"If your stepmother is on the way down, there's nothing we can do except wait," said Connister. "She may have had motor trouble. If the sheriff's office thinks it's urgent enough they will have the Willamette City police locate her, providing she hasn't left the city."

Dolores was swaying with exhaustion. "I think I'll go to my own cabin, Stark."

"If you think you'll be all right." He put her in his car and drove to the Blue Tides. The sheriff's car stood at the door. They had stopped at Connister's cottage, Ridell said, and found him gone.

Connister explained, and Dolores invited them in, unnecessarily, since they were already striding up the steps. When she had lighted lamps Ridell asked:

"You were unable then to reach your stepmother, Miss Dalquist?"

"Yes. She left a friend's, Mrs. Talman's, apartment, just after noon."

"We'll notify the State officers to be on the look-out for her. What make of car is she driving?"

"A blue Pontiac with a white top."

Ridell turned to Connister. "You may go home now, if you like. I'll talk with you later."

He understood that the sheriff preferred to question Dolores alone. But Ridell knew nothing about the attacks on the girl, or that she could be in deadly peril. He didn't want to go into it, however, with Dolores looking the way she did.

Ridell read the anxiety in his eyes. "I'll get a State Trooper down here to mount guard until Mrs. Dalquist arrives."

Dolores smiled wanly at Connister. "I'll be all right, Stark, if there's someone outside, and Joanne will surely arrive any minute. I appreciate all you've done for me."

He felt better then about leaving her, and drove home. He built up the fire again—there was no sustaining power to driftwood—and decided he could do with a nightcap. After he'd mixed one he dropped down beside the flames to drink it. The

machinery of the law was in motion, and that was reassuring. If Dalquist's death had *not* been an accident, Ridell appeared capable of solving the mystery. He turned his thoughts deliberately away from the picture of Dolores' father sprawled inertly on the crimson rocks.

A pounding on the door brought him staggering drowsily to his feet. "Who is it?" he shouted, and realised he'd been dozing.

"Sheriff Ridell."

He strode over and flung open the door, and Ridell and Scott Howard walked in.

"Have a chair by the fire," Connister said. "How about a drink, both of you?"

"Thanks, no, none for either of us." Ridell accepted the chair, however, and stretched out his hands to the blaze, while the good-looking Scott, regretfully opened his notebook and settled down at the table.

"I understand from Dolores Dalquist that someone made an attempt on your life Monday night." Ridell eyed Connister's head. "Why didn't you report it?"

Connister rested an elbow on the mantle. "It seemed too damned fantastic at first, that anyone would want to—well, murder me. I did a little futile scouting around on my own, but I was going in to see you in the morning."

"Did you suspect that Charles Dalquist's accident might not have been an accident?"

"I'm a bum detective, Sheriff, and I've never before seen a man who has just dropped off a seventy-five-foot cliff. If he struck a projecting rock hard enough . . . But that was a frightful wound on the back of his head."

"There are no projecting rocks on the cliff. It's soft sandstone mixed with pebbles and clay, and it crumbles easily. Every winter the sea eats away huge portions of it. There was loose rock on the shelf where he fell, but it couldn't cause that kind of injury. Also," the sheriff's hazel gaze was intent upon him, "he had been—dragged."

"Dragged?"

"Towards the Chasm. According to the coroner, Dalquist was pounded on the back of the head with a rock—*after* he dropped off the cliff, then dragged. There was a trail of blood. Now tell

us about the attack on you. The entire village appears to know about it."

Murder it was then. Connister felt a chill sense of unreality. Violent death in a war you expected, but in a quiet resort village . . . And the violence had been directed at himself also.

"What happened to me occurred only a few hours after someone attempted to shove Dolores Dalquist into the Chasm of the Stone Woman. Didn't she tell you?"

Ridell's brows shot up. "The girl? No, she didn't mention it. Are you certain that someone did?"

"After what happened now to her father, I most certainly am. But until the assault on me I was rather dubious. Something scared the living daylights out of the girl, and since I was a total stranger, I can't see any point in her lying. She came flying out of the fog as though she'd been grappling with death—and I think she had. Someone had given her a vicious shove from behind, while she was standing on the edge of the Chasm looking down. You'd hardly mistake strange hands grasping and pushing you."

"It's extremely unlikely," Ridell admitted. "And then?"

"She fell, but a shelf of rock that projects out a little caught her heels and gave her time to grasp hold of the ledge and crawl back up. It was a miracle she could do it. I know she did because her nails were torn and her fingers bleeding."

"You never saw this girl until she came here?"

"No. She was so terrified I took her to my landlady's house, Mrs. Jennie Grier, for a cup of tea to revive her."

"I've met Mrs. Grier. This is one of her houses, I believe. Who occupies the others up across the road?"

"They're both vacant now."

"We'll have a look at them."

It had never occurred to Connister that someone might be hiding in one of those empty cottages unknown to Jennie Grier.

Ridell drew a cigarette from his pocket and tapped it on the back of his wrist. "Now, about the attack on you?"

Connister gave him the meagre details.

"You didn't see an arm, a hand, anything?"

"My arms were loaded with firewood. I only noticed that the leaves on my right moved suddenly. The light from the kitchen door which I'd left open, blinded me to anyone out of its range,

anyway, but the trees make a dense tunnel there, as you can see if you care to step outside."

"We will, later. And the minister, Wellsley Jerome, found you?"

"That's right. I don't mind admitting I was suspicious of the guy. What was he doing up by my place on his way to get a bottle of milk? The grocery is in the exact opposite direction. But if he hit me," Connister spread out his hand, "why would he hang around to slop water in my face and bring me out of it, so that I could see him?"

Ridell smiled wryly. "Doesn't sound very logical nor likely. We'll talk to Jerome. Who else do you know down here?"

"Practically everyone enough to pass the time of day. Mr. Keeney, the grocery, in particular, Rocky Nelson, and old Eddie Dulin, the fisherman. Keeney and Nelson both appear too busy operating their respective businesses to take time out to attack visitors, and the only other person I've talked to at any length beside my landlady is . . ."

He stopped abruptly.

The sheriff caught him up instantly: "Is *who*?" he demanded.

Connister lounged over and dropped into a chair. "Ford Coburn. He's rather a queer bird, bitter about life—his wife fooling around with other men, his divorce . . . He's too good a suspect, maybe. I kinda like Coburn. Also," he added quickly, "he was here in my cottage smoking my cigarettes and reading my books when I returned from taking Miss Dalquist to her cabin—after the attack on her."

"But you stopped at Mrs. Grier's, you said, for how long?"

He considered uncomfortably. "Half an hour, possibly longer." The implication was plain.

"Where is Ford Coburn's cabin?"

"Back up behind mine. It's a ramshackle half-stone affair with a green roof, buried in trees. There's a short cut from here, a trail."

Ridell tossed his cigarette into the fire. "How well have you become acquainted with Coburn?"

"So far it's merely a vacation acquaintanceship. We met on the beach. He's been living here about three years, I understand. An ex-college professor."

Ridell climbed to his feet. "How long have you been here, and why are you here?"

Connister gave him a dry smile. "I'm here for my health. A virus bug hit me and I was too tired to fight it off, so the doctor banished me from town for a month. I've spent three weeks of it. I know the health part is difficult to swallow: six feet, brown, look husky as an ox . . ."

Ridell didn't smile. "Yes, you certainly appear vigorous enough. What's your occupation up in . . .?" he waited questioningly.

"Portland. I sell houses, property. I'm head of the Realty firm of Craft and Connister."

Scott carefully wrote it all down, and Ridell folded his arms along the back of a chair.

"All right, so now you can tell me your movements between three and six o'clock this afternoon."

CHAPTER SIX

THE WIDOW WAS LATE

CONNISTER STARED at the sheriff. "I hope you're not going to plunge into your investigation by suspecting *me*. What possible motive . . .?"

Ridell answered with a hint of impatience: "We have to know where everyone was, anyone who might have had the slightest connection with Dalquist. You never met him?"

"Sure, I met him. Yesterday morning when I stopped at his cabin after returning from White Bay where I'd had Doctor Bishop tape up my head. I was concerned about the girl."

"What was your impression of Dalquist?"

He shrugged. "I saw him for only a few minutes. He had the appearance of a typical prosperous professional man—unusually good-looking."

"Did you like him?"

"Well, no. He seemed cordial, but I'd say he had a steel core, and nothing could really get to him. In my business we've become pretty adept at sizing them up."

Ridell chewed on it.

Connister added: "I was irritated because he wasn't more alarmed about his daughter's fright on the beach. He was inclined to shrug it off as her imagination. Yet he used it for an excuse to cut short their stay down here."

The fire was dying and he walked over and tossed on more wood. A tangerine blaze flared up filling the room with the incense of cedar.

"Where were you this afternoon?" Ridell asked.

"Taking my daily ramble on the beach. Around three o'clock

Dolores came by and asked if I'd like to go with her to look at the Jerome garden, and I went with her."

"Was Jerome there?"

"No. He drove to White Bay, according to Mrs. Jerome, to see his dentist. We reached home, I suppose, about five. I had my dinner and fell asleep in that chair until maybe seven, when Dolores came running down to tell me her father had been missing ever since she returned from the Jeromes'."

"Would you know where Miss Dalquist was between five or six?"

"Of course not, but good God, you're not going to . . .?"

Wearily Ridell shook his head, removed his arms from the chair back and headed towards the door. "We like to know where everyone was. It could cast light on what happened. Dalquist was killed, roughly, between three and six o'clock, which is about as close as Bishop can come to the time of death. You saw no one between five and seven?"

"No one, and since no one saw me, I could be lying."

The sheriff nodded. "Can you think of any reason somebody might want you out of the way?"

"As I've said, I'm not on familiar terms with anyone, nor to my knowledge, given offence to anybody."

"These unrelated attacks," Ridell mused, "would seem to indicate an irrational mind. If it's the same person who killed Dalquist—he could be deadly to anyone."

Connister shook his head, a chill creeping along his spine. He thought the sheriff was about to leave, but instead he asked him to repeat in detail the finding of Charles Dalquist's body. When he had finished Ridell said at last:

"That seems to cover it. Come on, Scott."

The yawning deputy closed his notebook and moved after his superior.

With the door open on the cold black night, Ridell turned back again. "The murderer wouldn't have had to kill. Dalquist's neck was broken by the fall. I wonder what took him to the edge of the cliff?"

Connister locked the door after his departing guests. He no longer had the slightest doubt about a homicidal maniac being loose in Mandura. The act of going to bed did not necessarily induce slumber. In the darkness the murder of Dalquist appeared

more grim and horrifying. A rock such as might have been used on himself was an excellent weapon. It could be cast into the sea and who would ever find it?"

Now something stirred at the back of his mind. Something that had been there all the time but only dimly apprehended. Hadn't someone passed up the beach on the cliff side a short while before Dolores came fleeing in terror towards him?

Because of the fog he had not seen that person. As a matter of fact he had barely glanced in that direction, yet now he recalled hearing stones rolling as though dislodged by footsteps, and of being vaguely aware of a figure drifting through the shrouding vapours. However, since he hadn't seen the wanderer on the shore, what difference did it make? He pounded his pillow. Mulling over anything at that hour was useless.

The last embers of the fire fell apart and a soft flare of peach-coloured light glowed in the open doorway. He relaxed, feeling warm and drowsy.

Suddenly he jerked upright cringing as though ice-water had been dashed over him. One hand groped to his taped head. If the mysterious stranger who had passed him in the fog—*had been* the murderer of Charles Dalquist—and though he had not yet murdered—had attempted to kill Dolores Dalquist, he may have been aware of Connister on the beach, and hearing later in the village that he had been with Dolores after her fright, become alarmed lest Connister had glimpsed and could identify him. Could that explain the attack on himself?

His scalp prickled. If this was a planned crime, his life could very well be in deadly peril. If it were *not* a premeditated crime, everyone in Mandura was in danger.

That was the light in which the village regarded events: That every citizen of the town was in imminent peril.

When Connister walked up to Keeney's store to buy a newspaper next morning, the villagers were gathered in little knots along the boardwalk. They were not talking excitedly as might be expected, but conversing in low monotones, shifting uneasily about. It gave him the creeps. An undercurrent of brooding horror ran through the subdued voices, and the faces in the bleak light appeared blanched and drawn under the gaudy headscarves and old beach hats.

Eddie Dulin, the fisherman, puffing excitedly on his corn-cob pipe was the most animated of them all. Here and there moved lively young fellows through the groups of townspeople, fast-talking, cigarettes drooping between their lips, firing questions and shooting back their own replies before the Grey People could shape the words, which in the end gave them, of course, the most satisfactory information since in general all adjectives describing murder were essentially the same. They were newspaper reporters from the principal cities of the state. Connister could see the headlines:

VILLAGE OF CAPE MANDURA COWERS IN TERROR FROM
THREAT OF HORROR STALKING IN FOG. PROMINENT LAWYER
ON VACATION WITH BEAUTIFUL DAUGHTER MURDERED, ETC.

He managed to evade the reporters himself until he emerged from the store. Then one hawk-eyed young fellow pounced upon him. "You're Stark Connister, Real Estate Broker from Portland, I understand. I see your head is still bandaged from the brutal attack in the dark which nearly took your life. Have you any idea whom your assailant could be?"

"If I had," Connister told him grimly, "his head would look worse than mine."

He was thankful that at least the newsman didn't appear to know about the attempt on Dolores' life. He had only intimated that she might have been pushed accidentally to Jennie Grier, and apparently Jennie had not considered the incident seriously.

The reporter finally let him go, but not before a photographer had snapped his picture. He felt like an idiot, but the guys were only doing their job and earning a living.

On the fringe of the crowd he ran into Coburn lounging against the post office wall. He was smoking and watching the scene with sardonic amusement. "I trust you enjoyed my brief moment in the spotlight, Ford?"

"Tremendously. Tall men with curly hair are always so popular with the Press. I understand the glare of publicity is due to the fact that you nearly became a corpse yourself."

"It was too close to be amusing. Who told you?"

"That wizened ancient with the horrible-smelling pipe."

"Eddie Dulin?"

"Whose affairs have you been butting into anyway?" Coburn set his long legs in a loose-jointed gait down the street, and Connister fell in step with him.

"I haven't been butting into anyone's affairs. Have you formed any opinion about this accident, which it now appears is murder?"

"That is precisely what the sheriff wanted me to tell him, in addition, of course, to accounting for every minute of my life between three and six o'clock yesterday. A deceptively mild man, the sheriff, but tenacious as a bulldog."

Connister regarded the man attentively. "I hope you could—account for every minute, and that you had a witness, something I didn't have."

"There was no one to corroborate my story. I was hiking in the hills, which are densely wooded. Then I drove to White Bay to the library and read a while."

"You'd have no possible motive to kill an absolute stranger, Coburn, so what does it matter?"

Coburn gave a short laugh. "It matters considerably to that bloodhound of a sheriff, because Dalquist was *not* a stranger to me."

Connister halted in his stride and stared at the gaunt, putty-faced man stalking along beside him. "*No stranger to you?*"

"No." Coburn turned smouldering black eyes upon him. "Ridell got it out of me, damned cleverly, that I knew Dalquist back in Willamette City, and certainly had no reason to love him."

"How long ago was that?"

"I've been down here three years. It was shortly before that. I moved to Willamette City from Georgia, and Dalquist handled a case—against me, shall we say?"

"You say it, I don't get the picture. But any lawyer makes enemies. He's bound to. Maybe you were one of them."

"It's more than likely that I was."

"That must have made Ridell joyful." A thought occurred to him. "The name Dolores Dalquist seemed to mean nothing to you Monday when I talked with you."

"What possible difference could it make? I only knew the girl by sight, and the case had nothing to do with her."

"I suppose Ridell got out of you what that case was?"

"Down to the very last detail," Coburn said savagely, and closed his mouth.

X They were ploughing along the sandy road approaching the Jerome place. Connister shook his head. "You make such a darned good suspect, Coburn, in case your shell of irony is thin enough to have that fact penetrate. You knew the murdered man. You had the kind of legal business dealings with him that make you sound as though you'd swallowed poison hemlock, when you speak of him. You have no alibi for where you were during the time the man was killed."

"I recall that you mentioned you had none either."

"True enough, but I didn't know Dalquist other than to exchange half-a-dozen words with him. And I didn't try to knock my own brains out."

"It has occurred to me that my position could be—uncomfortable. These cops have to grab someone quick, with all this hue and cry going on."

"Well, I hope it won't be you, Ford, because you've no one to speak up for you. You have been outrageously rude to the villagers when you were not ignoring them completely, and that doesn't breed love. For an intellectual guy you're leading an empty, unproductive life, if you don't mind my saying so."

"I don't mind in the least, if you don't mind my telling you that how I live is my own damned business."

Connister shrugged.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

They both turned about to see a face peering at them through a multi-coloured mass of flowers. Its owner, the Reverend Wellsley Jerome, straightened and rustled through the petals to the fence. "This is a terrible crime against the Lord."

"Well, principally against Dalquist," Coburn replied dryly.

"The sheriff awakened us at three o'clock this morning to ask questions." The minister's tone was shocked. "Mr. Connister, he seems to think it strange I was taking a walk on my way to purchase a bottle of milk—in the opposite direction from the grocery store the night you were so viciously assaulted."

"Anywhere except in Mandura I'd think it was strange also," Connister told him. "In the light of what happened to the lawyer, Dalquist, Sheriff Ridell was justified, I suppose, in think-

ing that going nearly a mile out of your way on that particular night was, well, a little peculiar."

Reverend Jerome was indignant. "I don't consider it strange at all. Down here we do not live the life of iron routine which you city people do. We are retired from the world of rigid conventionality."

He rested his arms along the top of the fence and stared defiantly at them with his polished agate eyes. "One does not have to conform down here. A person may rise at midnight and walk the shore—as Mr. Coburn does—and no one will question it. I go barefoot and wear no shirt sometimes, and shock only my wife—which it does."

Connister thought of the parson's abandoned sleep, and felt that perhaps he understood, yet it didn't clear him any more than anyone else.

"Consequently, Mr. Connister, if I choose to stroll along the bluff on my way to the store, I fail to call it erratic behaviour."

"Well, so long as the sheriff agrees with you . . . Personally I'm still looking for the guy who slugged me."

"You certainly appear vigorous enough to take revenge." The ex-minister turned away, hurling his little thunderbolt as he sharply severed a withering flower head from one of the dahlias with a pocket knife. "Mr. Rocky Nelson was up there on the cliff path beyond the Dalquist cabin that night also."

Connister nearly jumped over the fence. "*Nelson?* Why the devil didn't you tell me?"

Jerome winced at the profanity. "That was before I found you, and there was no reason to connect the incident with what happened to you. Mr. Nelson was carrying a flashlight, and as usual a gun."

He was slowly submerging among the glistening blossoms, but Connister collared him. "Did you tell the sheriff?"

The pastor shook his head. "I only just now recalled the meeting. A most revolting person, Mr. Nelson."

"One step from the Neanderthal man," Coburn agreed.

A thought struck Connister. "Was I groaning loud enough for you actually to hear me from the road, Jerome?"

"Oh, no. I happened to glimpse a curious glow in your backyard and slipped in to investigate. The thought of danger never entered my mind. The glow was your flashlight lying on the

ground and shining into a clump of yellow fern. When I turned the corner of the house I heard you moaning and thought you had fallen."

"It's odd the sheriff didn't trip you on that."

"Oh, he did, right way. The police appear to want all the trifling details."

"Which sometimes add up to murder," said Connister.

He and Coburn moved on. Ridell should be told that Rocky Nelson was in the vicinity the night he was struck. A wiry root engaged his foot and he stumbled and suddenly remembered the fragment of rubber in his pocket, and peered down at his companion's shoes. They were brown leather, scuffed and broken.

Dropping behind a little he could see that their worn composition heels were intact and quite unlike the specimen he'd picked up. But surely Coburn possessed other shoes, beach shoes. No one wore leather on the coast if they owned rubber-soled footwear. Leather was impractical in wet sands and dangerous on slippery rocks.

He'd get up to Coburn's house and scout around. At the moment he was too concerned about Dolores to take up detective work seriously.

"Preacher or no preacher," Coburn said abruptly, "that stringy little guy is so full of venom it fairly drips from those sharp little fangs of his. If you consider me eccentric . . ."

"Well, he did give up the church because he could no longer love his fellow men," Connister admitted. "Yet I doubt if he'd ever resort to violence."

"I don't share your doubts. There is latent violence in most mousy suppressed individuals. Here's my road. I'll be seeing you, presumably, unless the sheriff decides I'm his most promising murder suspect."

"Practise *charm*, Ford. Even Ridell might be susceptible to it." Coburn snorted and disappeared up the trail between the green walls of *salah*.

Connister glanced at his watch. Eleven o'clock. He went on to the Blue Tides.

A State Trooper, heavy-eyed, but spruce in his dark green uniform, stood guard on the porch. Another car was parked beside the bronze Lincoln, a blue-and-white Pontiac. Dolores' stepmother had arrived.

"I'm Stark Connister," he told the trooper. "I live right down in that grove of pine. I'd like to see Miss Dalquist."

The man ran a trained eye over him. "I guess it's all right if you're a neighbour and know Miss Dalquist."

Dolores opened the door to his knock. Her black cowl-necked dress emphasised small high breasts, and gave her an arrow slimness. The dark hair was pinned back from her face, and her eyes were dull with pain. "I'm glad to see you, Stark. My stepmother arrived an hour ago. She was—horrified to hear—about father, and that the police had been trying to locate her."

She drew him into the birch-panelled room where lamps were burning against the daylight, and pushed forward a Windsor chair, but before he could drop into it, a slender woman in a stunning beige suit appeared in the doorway.

Dolores turned to her. "Joanne, this is Stark Connister. He has been very kind to me since—father . . ."

That Joanne Dalquist was stricken by her husband's death was evident. Though she was controlled and gave no indication of breaking down, her ashy pallor and desperately compressed lips betrayed terrific shock.

"How do you do, Mr. Connister." The rich voice was low and shaken.

He felt at a loss for words. "I know, Mrs. Dalquist, what a frightful shock . . . this is for you, and for Dolores."

She moved unseeingly to the smouldering fire, clasping and unclasping beautifully moulded hands. "It's unreal—incredible . . . *Charles* . . ."

He understood why Dolores mentioned her stepmother with restraint. There was nothing remotely resembling the maternal about her. A porcelain-pale skin dramatically enhanced the strange beauty of jewel-green eyes under heavy satin lids, suggesting mystery and slumbering passion. If the carmine mouth lacked humour its lush beauty made one forget the fact, and was assisted by a voluptuously curved figure.

She pressed thick waves of ash-blonde hair back from her temples. "The police were looking for me. They have notified the sheriff of my arrival. I was on the way. I hadn't planned to reach here until this evening, but on impulse I started yesterday afternoon, and spent the night at Fernrock."

She turned and gazed at Dolores. "I didn't want your father

to come down here," her tone was bitter. "Dolores has been talking for ages of a stay at the sea coast. Charles suddenly decided to come."

"You're suggesting," whispered the girl, "that dad would be—alive—now—if I hadn't wanted to come."

"I'm sure she doesn't mean that, Dolores," Connister said gently. "This is a dreadful thing for your mother to face."

"Dolores suffers from a persecution complex," her step-mother said. She shivered. "I hope the sheriff will allow us to return home immediately. I—I can't endure this place."

The throb of a motor came to them. It grew louder, then ceased and was followed by clipped footsteps on the porch. Dolores opened the door and Sheriff Ridell and Scott stepped into the room.

Connister decided his presence was unnecessary. The scene with the widow would be painful enough for her. He smiled reassuringly at Dolores: "I'll see you later."

She moved quickly to his side. "Stark, *please* stay."

He glanced inquiringly at the sheriff who nodded assent.

In less than five minutes Ridell had made the acquaintance of Mrs. Dalquist, had settled her in a chair, Dolores near by, and seated himself facing them.

"Why were we unable to reach you last evening at your apartment in the Crystal Towers, Mrs. Dalquist?"

X She hesitated the fraction of a minute. "I left home around one o'clock to drive down here. I decided to surprise Charles and Dolores."

Leaning against a bookcase Connister decided Joanne seemed hardly the type to take delight in springing childish surprises.

Ridell said thoughtfully: "Willamette City is ninety miles from Mandura. Driving slowly that would bring you into town by five o'clock at the latest. What made you change your plans?"

"My stepdaughter had made quite an issue about having a time alone with her father." The woman's eyes rested briefly and coldly on Dolores. "I finally decided when I reached Fernrock to wait another day and checked in at the Seacrest Motel."

"At what time?"

"Four-fifteen, perhaps, or four-twenty, I'm not certain."

"That can be determined from the manager of the Seacrest," Ridell said casually. "Then what did you do?"

"I freshened up and walked down to the beach—after changing my shoes. The weather was chill and misty so I didn't remain long. I'm not fond of the sea coast."

"What time would you say you left the beach?"

"I've no idea, really. I changed, got my car and drove to Falcon Point Inn for dinner."

"That's five miles from Fernrock. Are you acquainted with the Falcon Point Inn?"

"Charles and I dine . . ." Painfully she corrected herself, "have dined there a few times on week-end drives."

"Did you see anyone you knew while you were having dinner, or while you were driving down?"

She shook her head. The green eyes gazed unwaveringly at the sheriff's impassive face. "I know no one down here. After dinner I drove back to the Seacrest and came on here this morning."

"Thank you." Ridell gazed at his deputy who was recording Joanne's words in rapid shorthand. Connister surmised the sheriff was thinking what he was thinking: that Mrs. Dalquist had no alibi whatever—in the event she possessed a motive for killing her husband. She could have driven down to Cape Mandura, driven fast, gone to the cliff's edge with Dalquist, saw him fall and ran down and finished him off. It was a wild theory. Only blind rage would drive a woman to such ferocious action, to such violent, messy murder. Yet she struck him as a woman with passions held in leash, guarded by that smooth mask of loveliness.

She certainly made no effort to conceal her lack of concern for the girl, yet she might have reason not to be fond of Dolores for all Connister knew. But to suspect any apparently normal human being of that most extreme act—murder, seemed fantastic, not to Ridell, of course, who could probably visualise a criminal in his own aunt. To him the widow was likely his most promising suspect.

"Now can you tell me, Mrs. Dalquist," he was saying, "if you know of anyone who might be considered an enemy of your husband?"

She passed a quivering hand across her eyes. "Any prominent lawyer makes enemies, I suppose. Now and then he'd receive an ugly letter."

"Can you mention any fairly recent ones?"

She bit her lip reflectively. "There was a letter from a farmer in Willow Valley. The man had failed to make payments on his property for a long time, and Charles prepared the necessary legal papers which enabled the owner to dispossess him. The man was furious."

"What was his name?"

"Riggs or Briggs, some such name as that. Charles' secretary can tell you. The letter would be in his files."

"How long ago was this?"

She twisted slim shoulders as though in pain. "Perhaps three months."

"What is your husband's secretary's name?"

"Mrs. Ruth Sanderson." Her tone was clipped.

"Where can I find her?"

"When Charles made plans to come to Mandura he gave Mrs. Sanderson ten days' leave and she flew up to Seattle to visit her mother."

"Do you know the mother's address?"

Impatiently she shook her head. "It's probably written down in his desk somewhere."

There were two suspects the sheriff would certainly waste no time in checking out thoroughly. Mrs. Sanderson might be in Seattle, or she might not have gone at all. The farmer seemed a poor lead, Connister decided.

Dolores slipped from the room and returned presently with a cup of steaming coffee which she pressed into Joanne's hands. The sheriff allowed her a few minutes while she sipped it, then asked:

"Were there any other ugly letters?"

"The only one I recall—a really threatening letter, was from a man named Coburn, quite a while ago."

They all jerked to attention. Ridell's black brows shot up.

"Coburn? What were the contents of that letter?"

"He wrote that if he ever caught Charles he'd thrash him within an inch of his life." She gave a weary shrug. "You see, Charles secured a perfectly justifiable divorce for Mr. Coburn's wife. He was a very unpleasant man and Charles got quite a good settlement for her. Mr. Coburn is a violent person and was even cited for contempt of court during the hearings."

The woman's brilliant eyes widened. "But that was nearly four years ago. The man hated Charles but would he hold a grudge so long? Could he have . . . ? It must surely be someone like that, of course . . ." her voice trailed away.

Connister's heart sank. It was evident that Ridell was impressed by her statement. There were more questions, which Joanne answered exhaustedly, but no further helpful information was elicited from her. Finally the sheriff rose and motioned to Connister.

"Come along, Connister, Mrs. Dalquist and her daughter need rest. Both of you, please remain here where I can reach you if necessary."

Joanne sprang to her feet. "But that's absolutely *unthinkable*, Sheriff, to remain in this dreary old cabin. I can't *endure* the coast. And the funeral . . ."

"The body will not be released for burial for several days, Mrs. Dalquist. The coroner's jury will meet tomorrow to determine for certain the exact cause of death, if possible." Ridell opened the door, and the woman turned bitterly away.

Connister nodded reassuringly at Dolores and she gave him a forlorn smile. "I'll be back soon," he promised.

He walked with the officers out into thin lemon-coloured sunlight that was slowly dissolving the mist. A wind, fresh and keen, brushed their face. It seemed like insanity to believe in the brutal reality of murder.

CHAPTER SEVEN

RELIC OF LOST SPRINGS

"I SUPPOSE you're headed directly for Coburn?" Connister said, as the three men climbed into the sheriff's car.

Ridell nodded. "That's right. Were you aware that Ford Coburn knew the dead man?"

"He mentioned it to me this morning. I also learned that Reverend Jerome met the agate-shop owner, Rocky Nelson, on the trail back of the cliff the night I was knocked out. I don't know anything about the man, but if anyone was near my place that night I'm suspicious of him."

Ridell gnawed his lip reflectively. "I haven't anything against Nelson except that the State boys picked him up a couple of times for drunk driving. He's a scrappy cuss when he's had a few, and I always mistrust the ones who get ugly when they drink."

The deputy negotiated the twisting narrow road, skilfully skirting the potholes and deepest ruts and brought the car to a stop inches from Connister's driftwood gate.

"What reason would Nelson have for attacking you?" Ridell wanted to know. "Or for that matter, murdering Dalquist, if we try to connect the two? Unless he knew the lawyer up in Willamette City, which is possible. Dalquist was pretty important up there, I've learned. Nelson has been around here four or five years. He likes to hunt, and he's doing well enough, I guess, with that shop of his, but he must have worked at something else before he drifted down to Mandura. We'll talk to him."

Connister alighted from the car, then turned. "I can think of only one reason why someone might want me out of the picture. Last night it flashed back to me that somebody passed me in the fog the night Dolores Dalquist claims some person attempted to hurl her into the Chasm of the Stone Woman. If

that person happened to be the one who made an attempt on her life, he might be afraid that I'd glimpsed him and could identify him. The fact that I *haven't* should indicate to him that I *can't*, but he might not dare to let it go like that."

The sheriff was alert at once. "In that case, if the coroner's jury decides positively that murder has been done, you may still be in danger."

"That thought has already occurred to me," Connister agreed gloomily.

"Think back carefully. What was it you thought you saw?"

"It was what I heard: stones rolling as though footsteps had dislodged them. The beach at that point is all small pebbles until you reach the flat boulders by the Stone Woman. I assumed at the time that somebody had passed me on the cliff side, and had the vague impression of a moving shape."

Ridell shrugged impatiently. "Well, keep your eyes open, and don't leave this area, Connister."

"Hell, no. I'm down here for my health, remember?"

"The inquest is tomorrow at one o'clock."

"Do I have to be there, Sheriff?"

"No. We have your statement in writing."

"Then I shall go fishing." He remained at the gate watching the car turn and begin the steep grind up to Coburn's house. Poor devil, he was in for a gruelling session. Coburn was not exactly lovable, yet he felt an irritated kind of sympathy for him. He was like a man possessed by seven demons. Had those demons prodded him into killing Charles Dalquist?

He ate salami and cheese for lunch, and finishing off the meal with a cigarette, thought of his bit of hoarded rubber and dug it out of his pocket. It could have been gouged off by the rocks from any shoe in Mandura innocently tramping the stony beach. There was nothing whatever to link it with the crime, except that it had been lying near Dalquist's body.

The shoes from which the fragment had chipped off had probably been canvas or sailcloth, for the rubber was thick, and a dark tan which would indicate a masculine shoe. Women's beach shoes, or at least those he'd happened to notice, usually had a white coating for dressiness.

Then he observed something which had failed to register on his brain before. There was a dull yellowish substance clinging

to an edge of the fragment. Clay. *Clay?* A sudden vision of the tall cliffs that ran for several miles down the coast flashed to his mind's eye. He sprang up, dropped the rubber back into his pocket and set out in the sunny wind for the cliffs.

As he came abreast of Jennie Grier's house she came striding from the back door carrying a basket of clothes. She saw him and waved, then set the basket down and hurried across the yard to him.

"I'll be down a little later with a glass of my blackberry jelly for your dinner, Mr. Connister. It turned out beautiful."

The jelly, he suspected, was an excuse to extract a little information from him. "I saw a real handsome car drive up to the Blue Tides cabin. Did Mrs. Dalquist arrive? Then Sheriff Ridell whirled by."

"Yes, Mrs. Dalquist is here."

Mrs. Grier struggled a moment with avid curiosity. The wind ruffled her short silver-threaded hair, and fluttered like a bright flag, the apron she was wearing incongruously over brown pedal pushers. Finally she gave up the struggle: "Mr. Connister, what is she like? The widow?"

He laughed. "She's the type of woman a prominent man like Charles Dalquist would choose to add to his prestige: glamorous, beautiful . . ."

"My, my! Is she dark or fair?"

"Blonde, I guess."

"I hope I get a glimpse of her. Was she—real broke up about him?"

Connister leaned against the fence. "She was controlled. There were no tears, but it was a knock-out blow."

"Poor woman. Poor, *poor* woman! I suppose they will be leaving right away?"

"The sheriff told them to remain here in Mandura. The inquest is tomorrow at one."

She walked over and lifted a wet pillowslip from the basket and shook it free of wrinkles. "What is an inquest? I've read about them in the newspapers, but I've never really understood."

"Well, the coroner, who, in this region happens to be the local physician, Doctor Bishop, since physicians are scarce in this county, meets with a jury made up of local citizens, and they decide how the person met his death. It will be held in White

Bay since that's the largest town around here and where the coroner has his dreary little establishment, I understand."

"Oh, everything takes place in White Bay. We run up there to church, to get our drugs, to see the doctor, and have our babies, and finally to the hospital to die. Well, I shouldn't think that jury would have much debating to do—if falling off a near hundred-foot cliff wasn't cause enough of death."

She lifted the basket. "Will you have to testify, since you found—him?"

"No. Sheriff Ridell has my statement in writing. I'll probably only be mentioned as the one who discovered the body."

She shivered. "That's enough, for goodness sakes! Well, I'd better get these clothes on the line while there's a little sunshine." She moved away, then turned back looking a trifle ashamed.

"I think I'll have all my cabins occupied this week-end, what with this excitement. It may not scare folks off. Mr. Keeney thought it might even bring them flocking down, and he's laid in more grocery stock. What do you think?"

He didn't have the heart to tell her that he thought it highly improbable anyone would remain overnight in a murder-haunted town, even if they drove down out of curiosity to look around.

"Mr. Keeney is a far better authority on what people are likely to do than I am, Jennie. He's been here a lot longer." He moved away.

Murder had awakened the Grey People. He swung on up the trail. Ahead of them loomed winter; fog trailing its phantom draperies, rain lashing down across mountain and shore . . . From the windows of their little houses they would stare forth out to illimitable lonely wastes of water heaving under a leaden sky, in their ears the moaning of the tides, the harsh scream of gulls, while, battering winds shook their walls. Boredom and depression were a slow and horrible decay.

The door to the Blue Tides was closed, oyster-white curtains drawn across the windows. He stopped a little farther along to gaze back at the Grier cottages, remembering Ridell had suggested one of them might have been a hiding place for the murderer. He had undoubtedly already determined whether there was any evidence to indicate that they had been. They were neatly shingled, adorned with window-boxes overflowing

with pink petunias. For Jennie's sake he hoped they'd be rented soon. Landlords of beach houses derived no benefit from murder and terror.

Two hundred yards beyond the cottages the road dwindled to a dead end, but a trail led north and he followed it through yellowing lace of bracken and silvery beach grass. The force of the wind was spent here among the dense pines. Matted grass told him where Dalquist had gone to the cliff's edge. Numberless feet had trampled it. The lawyer had cut away from the trail and gone directly to the frail outer crust of the cliff, a perilous shelf projecting over nothingness.

From the top of the cliff, however, it appeared solid enough. Connister stood as close to the edge as he dared, and gazed with a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach from the crumbled ledge far down to black, glistening rocks below, swept clean now of their crimson stains by the lashing spray of the sinister chasm.

Today the waves pounded less heavily around the Stone Woman, and sunlight plated with gold the dark planes of her face. White gulls circled in the blue about her head, uttering their shrill despairing cries. What did she know? What had she seen? She would never tell.

Cautiously retreating from the deadly rim he moved along the cliff away from the town looking for anything the eye of the police might have missed. He had no idea what it could possibly be. His eyes probed the shivering grasses which had undoubtedly been finely combed by the sheriff's men.

Suddenly he halted. Perhaps two hundred feet from where Dalquist had gone over, the edge of the cliff was broken as though somebody had plunged down. The bluff sloped here to a mere fifty feet or so and as he peered over he could see quite plainly raw clay broken by skidding heels, crushed clumps of purple beach aster, as though someone had negotiated the steep descent at this lower point.

Was that how the yellow clay had come to be embedded in the broken rubber he carried in his pocket? There had been clay all about the dead man's body which had fallen with him from the cliffs. The soles of the murderer's shoes must be stained with it. It wasn't conclusive evidence of anything, yet he had no right to keep the fragment. He'd turn it over to Ridell to make of it what he could.

Once more he followed the new trail with his eyes. At the foot of the cliff where a rubble of broken earth indicated the descent had ended, the beach was paved with small stone offering no footprints. He marked the spot in his memory and turned back, determined to go down and view the trail from the shore beyond the Stone Woman.

"Find anything interesting?"

The low voice rocked Connister back on his heels. He whirled to see a tall reedy young fellow, perhaps eighteen, standing among the ferns. Restless eyes under a shock of sandy hair regarded him with sharp interest. He wore a clean blue T-shirt and tan slacks, and was twirling a stick.

Connister regained his calm. "Are you Healy Riggs? I'm Stark Connister."

"I know you are. The way you were nosing about I thought maybe you were on the track of a hot discovery. This is getting to be a darned exciting place, isn't it?"

"A darned dangerous place. Doesn't that alarm you, Healy?"

The boy shrugged. "Lord, no. I've lived here all my life. It's you vacation people he's after."

"Why do you say 'he'?" Connister lit a cigarette and grinned at him. "Do you have the foggiest notion whom this deadly person might be?"

Healy looked astonished. "It would have to be a guy. No woman would smash people like that. How should I have any idea who's attacking people?"

"Boys get around, and you probably hear a lot of talk in your father's service station and in Rocky Nelson's shop."

"Get around?" Healy snorted. He fell into step beside Connister and they sauntered back towards the village. "Mister, I may work in a gas-station and a rock shop but I never hear a *live* word. I just wash car windows, fill gas tanks and boil out star fish. I was going to college but my dad needs me at the station and I make extra money working for Rocky, so here I am *stuck*."

"It must be rather a dull life for you, Healy."

"You said it. I get so fed up I could throw a bomb into the post office. But I'm making dough, especially in the summer when people come down to see her."

"Her?"

"The Stone Woman, of course. She is Mandura. If it wasn't for her this town would be buried, man, for sure."

He spoke as though the great stone head was a living woman, casually, as a matter-of-fact. In a way Connister understood. No one in Mandura could ever quite forget she was there; the awesome menace of the chasm below her, the ominous boom of imprisoned waters. Perhaps a boy growing up under the black wizardry of her fame would unconsciously grow to think of her as human, female.

"Why did you say that it was only the vacation people the murderer was after, Healy?"

Healy lashed at the ferns with his stick. "Because the folks who live down here don't like summer visitors, unless they're renting cabins to 'em. They pick their flowers, take short cuts tramping through their yards, throw beer cans around, and act like they owned the town. Even old Keeney who sells 'em groceries gets fed up. Boy, does he get fed up?"

"I've tried not to do any of those things," Connister said with a smile. "But tell me, Healy, what is your honest opinion of these happenings?"

He spoke as man to man and Healy was flattered. "Well—I sure think that retired parson is a kind of screwball, and I know his wife is. I don't dig that wild-eyed Ford Coburn either, and I don't like him. Everybody hikes around here, but they don't prowl everywhere like a ghoul all night too. I drive home late from a movie at White Bay and who do I see stalking along in the dark? Old Coburn. I see him making down the trail before daylight when I open the station. I say the guy's got something on his mind that's spookin' him, or he's up to something."

"You don't consider anyone else a little queer?"

"Oh, most of the folks buried back in these shacks are pretty quiet, but Grier, now she's an old harpy."

"Mrs. Grier?"

"Sure. She takes a broom to my dog when he gets into her flower bed, and when I shot a pane out of one of her cottage windows with my twenty-two, she called Sheriff Ridell. Tough old girl."

"Good Lord, if you shot out one of my windows, Healy, I'd call the sheriff too."

"It was an accident and the blamed house was empty." Healy halted where the trail branched.

"How do you like working for Rocky Nelson?"

The boy hesitated and stared with unreadable grey eyes towards the sea. Then he shrugged. "Well enough, when he hasn't got a few whiskies under his belt. Then he's mean, man, *mean*. But he's sorry afterwards and gives me a few extra bucks."

Connister searched the boy's face for an instant. "Where were you when Mr. Dalquist was killed?"

Healy caught no implication in the question. "Me? I was tending shop for Rocky. He went off somewhere."

"Off where, do you know?"

"Didn't ask. Didn't give a darn. He beats it away often like that."

"What time did he get back?"

"Maybe seven o'clock. My mother ragged me because I was late for dinner."

"Were you in the agate shop all the time he was gone?"

"Most of the time." His tone was evasive. "Business is slower than cold motor oil this time of year. You sure are curious, mister. I gotta get back to the station."

He plunged away, stumbled over a twisted root and Connister's eyes went to the lad's feet. He was wearing dark brown canvas shoes with brown soles. They appeared practically new, the heels unbroken. Had there been a reason for purchasing new shoes?

"Well, good-bye, Healy, it was nice talking with you."

Connister gazed thoughtfully after him. The lad seemed open enough, and shooting panes out of windows was a typical kid accident. Or, could it have been done just for the excitement of it? How far might Healy's yen for excitement carry him, if he'd gone so far as to mentally toss a bomb into the post office?

Healy suddenly swung back. "Wonder what's going to happen next?" he shouted. Then in cheerful anticipation of future horrors went his way.

The boy had practically admitted being absent at intervals from the agate shop while he was supposed to be taking Rocky's place. But sticking around an empty shop would be intolerably dull for a restless lad.

He recalled his intention to examine the base of the cliff be-

yond the Stone Woman and set off down to the trail which spiralled steeply to the shore.

The gulls went with him, floating on the wind, screaming his presence to the empty reaches of sky and sea. Warily he skirted the treacherous boulders of the chasm, icy spray misting his face, and made his way to the spot where he had marked signs of a recent descent.

At the base of the massive wall a loose scattering of saffron clay assured him that he had not been wrong. Somebody, not too long ago, had made a hasty trip down that sheer incline, heels skidding and sliding as they went.

Had it been the murderer who had plunged down that way? If so, why? Had he seen Dalquist fall, and in a mentally disordered rage, snatched up a rock and made certain he was dead?

It was so damned illogical. But there was nothing logical about any of the attacks as far as he could see. To someone, however, walking among them, wearing the mask of sanity, all that had happened made perfect logic. The thought gave him cold shivers.

When he opened his cottage door it was pleasantly evident that it had been thoroughly cleaned. A white pitcher holding violet spikes of veronica stood on the table in the living-room, and beside it lay a note from his landlady. Reverend and Mrs. Jerome—it read—had invited Connister and herself to dinner that evening at six o'clock. Would he like to go? She would stop by on her way.

He decided he would like to go for two reasons. The thought of a hot, home-cooked meal had overwhelming appeal. It would also give him the opportunity to get better acquainted with the Jeromes, who might know something which would shed light on his investigations.

He took a shower and for the first time since his arrival in Mandura, donned a white shirt, black tie and grey business suit.

Mrs. Grier's eyes flew wide when she saw him. "My goodness, don't you look handsome—and distinguished!"

The fog was holding off and the sun swathed in pink mist was sinking into a cobalt sea, but a wind from the north-west bearing the strong odours of rockweed and kelp swept over them with cold force.

The Jerome residence was aglow with lamps. A fire burned in

the oil stove in a living-room whose plastered walls were as drab as the out-of-date walnut furniture. The only note of colour was a blue urn glowing with dahlias of carnival scarlet.

"I'm so pleased you could come," Mrs. Jerome said, with her ghostly smile. She wore a maroon gown which unfortunately did little to brighten her pale features, and as a concession to the festive occasion a necklace of small pearls which looked genuine.

"I felt we just shouldn't sit in our houses dwelling upon this dreadful tragedy," the woman added. She turned to her neighbour. "How handsome you look, Jennie."

Connister flung a shocked glance at his landlady. She had chosen a gown of cerise cut low to reveal thin brown arms and an expanse of flat chest, but she wore it with a certain air. There were rhinestones glittering in her ears, and with a lavish hand she had assisted nature in brightening cheek and lip.

"I'm certainly glad to be out of my house for a while," she declared. "Reverend Jerome, your flowers are lovelier than they have ever been."

He beamed and for a moment Connister rather liked him. Then the guarded look returned to the agate eyes and his wrinkled lips tightened severely. "How good of you to say that, Mrs. Grier. Do be seated both of you, until Evelyn has dinner on the table."

Connister drew a cigarette from his pocket, felt for his matches, found none and glanced questioningly about.

"There are matches on that stand beside you, Mr. Connister," the pastor said.

Connister reached out to a miniature white stoneware pitcher filled with old-fashioned sulphur matches. He picked it up. Faint gold lettering on one side read LOST SPRINGS LODGE. It had probably once graced the dining-hall of the deserted hotel up in the hills.

Mrs. Jerome appeared in the doorway. "Dinner is on the table."

On reflection Connister felt he should have suspected dinner would be what it was, knowing Mrs. Jerome. The meagre pork roast was overdone, the mashed potatoes soggy, and the green beans looked like limp eels. This repast was followed by apple pie, skimpy on apples, and dismally weak coffee. Over the latter Mrs. Jerome said in a hushed voice:

"The sheriff has been questioning people about where they were and what they were doing when Mr. Dalquist—was killed. It makes one feel pretty queer—having to have an alibi the way people do that you read about in newspapers. He spent a long time up there with Mr. Ford Coburn. I saw the county car when it drove away."

"It's routine to question people, Mrs. Jerome," Connister told her with a smile. "We all have to tell the authorities anything we might know, and if the death was more than an accident, our information could be valuable. Mrs. Dalquist told the sheriff that Coburn had written a threatening letter once to her husband. I hope Ridell didn't make too much of it."

The instant the words were out he wondered what idiotic impulse had prompted them. Was it to get their reaction?

Jennie reacted immediately: "*Mr. Coburn* knew Charles Dalquist?"

"Only as his wife's lawyer. He secured a divorce for Mrs. Coburn."

"Mr. Coburn is a boorish, unchristian man," declared Mrs. Jerome. "We should not judge lest we be judged, yet I feel he carries the seeds of evil within him. Perhaps the sheriff will arrest him."

Connister sipped his atrocious coffee. "An unsocial manner doesn't necessarily indicate a tendency to murder."

"He seems to be a bitter, unhappy man."

Reverend Jerome said calmly: "A certain philosophical detachment is desirable in considering the quality of human guilt. What would be termed murder in the eyes of the law might not actually be a crime at all. Indeed, some murders would appear justified."

"Vengeance is mine," quoth Mrs. Jerome solemnly. "Perhaps that is what you mean, Wellsley."

But what these cryptic observations signified Connister felt unqualified to judge, though they had an ominous ring in his ears. Jennie Grier only shrugged.

Their host pushed back his dessert plate, pursed his pale lips and made a steeple of his fingers. "Now I was quite persistently interrogated by Sheriff Ridell. You see I was—er—assumed to be at my dentist's. But as a matter of fact I was not."

"For goodness sake, where were you?" cried Jennie ex-

citedly. "I hope it was some place where people saw you?"

"A number of persons saw me, but no one would remember. I called at the home of a fisherman friend near the docks on White Bay, but he was not at home so I lingered about watching the fishing craft. I enjoy doing that. Then I returned to my car and drove home. You see? People saw me, but no one paid the slightest attention, for I understand the sheriff questioned all the townspeople most thoroughly. Consequently I have no alibi."

"No one would ever suspect a man of the Cloth of a crime," protested Mrs. Jerome. She was very still for a moment gazing with those expressionless lack-lustre eyes at her husband. "Why did you not go to the dentist, Wellsley?"

"I did, my dear, but Dr. Pierce was called out of town."

Connister decided the sheriff had probably checked on that also. The Reverend Jerome wandering around White Bay with only his word to prove he was there certainly gave Ridell another suspect, parson or no parson.

Reverend Jerome said aggrievedly: "I must say the sheriff manifested more interest in my actions the night Mr. Connister was struck over the head. Perhaps it is unchristian to say this, but I have felt inclined to wish I had not gone to your assistance, Mr. Connister."

Connister gave him a disarming smile. "I'm very grateful that you did."

"Now where were you that terrible night, Stark Connister?" demanded Jennie, shaking a finger at him. "The way you drift around, no one knows where you'll turn up." She leaned across the table, blue eyes twinkling at him behind their thick glasses. "Are you really down here for your health? You've never looked ill. Do *you* have an alibi?"

He set down his coffee cup. "That depends on the moment when the accident happened. Miss Dalquist and I were admiring the Jerome dahlias until four o'clock, then we strolled in the pines for perhaps an hour. After that I was in my own place napping. Unless someone glimpsed me the sheriff has only my word also concerning my actions."

"Is it absolutely necessary someone see you—to keep the police from suspecting you of possibly—murder?" Mrs. Jerome's voice was horrified. "Mr. Ridell was as stern as though both

Wellsley and I were criminals. After you and Miss Dalquist left I came right into this room and took up my sewing."

"Did anyone see you, Evelyn, or did you see anyone?" Mrs. Grier demanded with enthusiasm.

The pastor's wife shook a dismayed head. "Not that I know. I sewed until Wellsley returned, about six o'clock. Then I warmed up the veal stew I'd made the day before."

Jennie Grier slapped the table with a hard, brown hand. "That reminds me . . . I meant to bring you a glass of my blackberry jelly, Evelyn. It turned out real clear. I was up there in the hills near the old Lost Springs Lodge picking blackberries while all this dreadful excitement was going on. You should see the berries this year—hanging in great clusters. My husband loved wild blackberry jelly. I brought home two full pails that day."

Connister was struggling with Mrs. Jerome's pie crust. "I've never gone up to the ruined hotel. How long has it been since the place was in operation?"

"Ten years or more." Reverend Jerome answered thoughtfully. "It was built a long time ago, around 1897 or '98. Many of the walls are caved in now, and a portion of the roof has fallen. In this damp sea air everything deteriorates rapidly. It was once an exclusive health resort. There are mineral springs hidden up there under the jungle of shrubbery."

"It's a wonderful site for an hotel, high on the hillside. I'll have to hike up there."

"I strongly advise you not to, Mr. Connister. It is dangerous—rotting floors, everything overgrown with wild clematis vines that conceal holes where you could plunge into the old cellars. Don't go up there. It must have been pleasant when guests drove up in their carriages. You can't even see now where the road used to be. Visitors could sit on the great veranda and look up and down the coast and upon the roofs of the village."

"It sounds romantic."

"The world was less complex in those early days of the hotel," the minister said sombrely. "No speeding cars, no dark bar-rooms where they allowed ladies to drink liquor. People were more God-fearing."

"Sin was not so prevalent," added his wife in her spiritless voice. "But sin is the penalty for our being human. We must accept it and it is our duty," she looked sternly at her husband,

"to wage a ceaseless battle against the Devil—destroy the forces of evil. We must be washed in the blood . . ."

She turned earnestly to Connister. "Wellsley has turned his back on his duty, broken his sacred vows. Evil flourishes everywhere, and he has forsaken his pulpit. He should be saving souls, wrestling with the converts of Satan. But I do what I can—alone."

"Evelyn," her husband said mildly, "did not have to compose sermons, or cope with the conflicting personalities of the congregation. When one begins to feel intense animosity towards people," his voice grew grim, "then it's time to get away—quickly."

Mrs. Jerome rose to her feet. Her pale lips were twitching. "Shall we go into the other room where we can be more comfortable?"

"My word!" exclaimed Jennie Grier, with wicked humour, as she and Connister walked home through a cold amethyst-clear night. "Evelyn is going to have a lively time avenging the sinful deeds of this old world, carrying on Reverend Jerome's duties to civilisation. Her conversation is a little bloody."

And her cooking was murderous. That pie crust would make excellent shoe rubber . . . *Rubber . . .*

He skidded to a halt. The blow on his head must have addled his wits. The mention of blood . . . He'd been seeking a beach shoe with a hunk of rubber missing from one heel. But he would never find it. Not if it had actually come from the murderer's shoe. No murderer would be wearing the shoes. They would be heavily splattered with blood, and the clothing he was wearing would also be stained with blood. Silently he cursed his stupidity.

If the clothing and the shoes had not been destroyed, they could be hidden in Mandura.

Jennie was tugging at his arm. "What on earth is the matter? The way you jumped . . . Did you see a ghost?" She was peering at him through the wind-swept darkness. Her laugh was nervous. "I'm getting jittery myself, scared of every tree shadow. What did you see?"

"Nothing," he said, taking her arm. "I just remembered something—very important, Jennie."

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE SECRET OF THE PINES

THE FRAGMENT of rubber he had picked up beside the body of Charles Dalquist now seemed unimportant to Connister. It was bloodstained clothing he should be seeking. Mrs. Jerome's solemn words: "... washed in the blood ..." made a sinister refrain in his head long after he'd flung himself into bed. A great detective he'd make.

Friday morning was grey. A sullen day with waves the hue of cold steel thundering high. Mist veiled the gaunt Cape and headlands and drifted with a buffeting wind. After breakfast Connister pulled on a dark turtle-neck sweater and wind-breaker and headed for Coburn's place.

As he approached his own rickety shed something fluttering on a branch caught his eye. A strand of wool was snagged by a pine branch projecting over the path where he'd carried his fuel the night he'd been struck down. Carefully he untangled it. Yarn, grey yarn—from a sweater? A cap? Had he found a genuine clue? A tingling ran along his spine.

Why hadn't he noticed the yarn before? Probably because his thoughts had been entirely taken up with finding the weapon which had struck him. It might have been snagged only yesterday. If it had hung there ever since the attack on him, whose sweater or knit cap was it? No one wore a knit cap that he'd noticed, but everyone along the coast owned a sweater.

He had never suspected how unobservant he was until he found he was unable to recall the colour of anyone's clothes, with the exception of Jennie Grier whose colourful attire hit you in the eye. Carefully he laid the grey strand into his billfold and went on.

Coburn's house was old, its walls the hue of driftwood, the

roof patched with moss. It was all but buried among the glossy thick leaves of salah and dense pines. From the chimney smoke was blowing in silvery gusts.

His neighbour was eating a late breakfast, and the room smelled of fried bacon and tobacco smoke.

"I'll pour you some coffee, Connister. It's hot, and coffee isn't worth a damn unless it is." He was wearing a pair of wrinkled brown slacks, a faded brown T-shirt and a grey sweater with holes in the elbows. Connister gulped.

Coburn handed him the coffee sloshing around in a cracked green cup. "Anything new down there in the valley of horrors?"

"No new outbreaks of violence to my knowledge. Did you have a nice chatty session with the sheriff yesterday?" Connister took a sip of the coffee and winced. It was hot all right and so potent his spoon would probably melt in it.

Coburn scowled. "He had me raking up the past." He settled back at his cluttered table and lifted his own cup. "He also accused me of writing a threatening letter to Dalquist. Is the widow trying to frame me for murder—to conceal her own guilt?"

"Did you write a threatening letter, Ford?"

"I most certainly did write to that skunk, Dalquist." Coburn's eyes in his thin sallow face smouldered with rage. "I told him I'd knock the living daylights out of him if I ever met him face to face. I would have too, but I wouldn't hunt him down. The muck he stirred up about me and dragged into the courtroom, *lies*—because I fought against paying my wife an alimony that would strip me down to naked poverty."

"Didn't you have a lawyer?"

He nodded, reaching for a briar pipe, lying in a saucer. "Sure, but Dalquist got around him. There's nothing, of course, more pathetic than a pretty abused woman," his voice shook a little, "standing in the witness-box testifying in tears how brutal her husband has been to her. She called it brutality because I insisted on a little fidelity on her part."

He reared to his feet. "How about a glass of brandy?"

"Fine." Connister watched his host lift down a squat bottle from the cupboard and fill two tumblers with dark amber liquor.

"Shall we drink to the murderer?"

"I won't go that far, but I admit you've no cause to love Dalquist, even if he was only doing what he was paid to do." The brandy was rich, fiery. He swivelled around in his chair and motioned to a pile of books stacked haphazardly on a nearby stand. He read their authors aloud: "Nietzsche, Schopenhauer . . . You'll never learn to love your fellow men reading those guys."

"Who wants to love his fellow men? If you don't love 'em they can't crucify you."

"Thanks no. I'm going fishing. Want to come along?"

"Not today, but come back and see me again."

Connister felt a twinge of conscience' spying on his neighbour in the guise of friendship. Coburn had no fireplace, and while anything could be buried under the disorderly heaps of junk in his place the man would surely never keep anything as gruesome about as stained clothing and shoes. There was a wood burner in the kitchen, yet it seemed unlikely any murderer would attempt to burn such articles. There would be a stench and a good deal of smoke, or so he assumed, never having found it expedient to burn his clothes.

Was the strand of wool from Coburn's grey sweater? The shade appeared to be about the same, but there was more to it than that, texture, weight . . . He couldn't very well compare them. He'd show his dubious scraps of evidence to the sheriff and leave it up to him.

He collected his fishing gear, threw it into the car and drove up the coast to Redrock River. Until nearly three o'clock he fished more or less tranquilly in the green pools under the willows and caught three trout for his dinner.

He drove home whistling, slid the fish into the refrigerator, and went in to scrub up. When he came out someone was knocking on his door. It was Dolores. His heart gave a sudden leap at sight of her.

She stood quietly, dark eyes under the soft velvet hat, older, graver. In her narrow black suit and high heels she seemed a woman.

He smiled. "Come in, Dolores."

She slipped in and seated herself on the edge of the davenport, gripping her velvet handbag with tense grooved fingers. "I've just come from the—coroner's inquest."

He read the verdict in her eyes. "What decision did they reach?"

The golden cheeks went a shade paler. "Murder, Stark—by person or persons unknown. I—I can't bring myself to actually believe it, and yet . . . A terrible fall like that . . . Dr. Bishop explained it all in horrible detail, how he was struck—*later* . . ."

"He's trained to recognise the difference between injuries sustained in a fall from a high place—and those inflicted by—human hands."

Her voice was a ragged whisper. "I—wasn't mistaken, Stark, and you—were not mistaken. Someone—tried to kill us both, then did manage—to kill father."

He felt shaken himself. "It now seems certain. Look," he said abruptly, "let me take you up to Coral Cove for dinner, and get away from this place."

A little colour crept back into her face. "I'd love that. I'll run up and tell Joanne, if she's returned. She was going to drive back to White Bay and pick up a few things in the stores, since we'll have to stay on awhile."

When he picked her up a little later she gazed at him in astonishment. "I've never seen you in a suit before, Stark. You look like a very distinguished business man instead of a college football coach."

"A business man is what I am, my child, a very prosaic and undistinguished one."

A smile touched her lips. "Your eyes are just as blue, and as full of twinkles."

"You're trying to inflate my ego because I'm going to pay for your dinner, sweetheart."

Her ripple of laughter delighted him. He sent the car climbing up the narrow road to the village. "Did Joanne make any objections to your going?"

"She wasn't there. I left a note."

"Why didn't she just remain in town if she had shopping to do, or did you drive to the inquest together?"

"We both went in Joanne's car. The sheriff mentioned as I was leaving that he wanted to ask me more questions later. I've told him everything of importance already. I knew so little about Dad's affairs. Being away at college the last two winters, and summers teaching in a dance studio."

She stared unseeingly through the windshield. "No one down here is connected with father, so there's nothing I can help the police with in that way. If—it had happened back in Willamette City, he might have had enemies, but I wouldn't know, and I doubt if Joanne would either . . . He rarely discussed his cases."

"Well, Ford Coburn was eaten up with hatred of your father. He must have been crazy about his wife, even though she was apparently unfaithful to him, and your dad made the poor guy out a brute in court. It's done all the time, of course, by lawyers, but Coburn's the brooding, intellectual type who wouldn't forget and would never forgive. That kind can be dangerous."

"How about Rocky Nelson, Stark? Could father somehow have become acquainted with him? I keep hearing about him, and he sounds like an unpleasant man."

Connister's eyes were thoughtful on the highway ahead. "I don't like Nelson, but it's only a personal antipathy. Why should he attack the tourists who support him? That goes for Keeney, and Riggs, Mrs. Grier, and Healy Riggs, and the postmaster and anyone else who lives by the tourist trade."

She moved closer to him. "Everything frightens me now, Stark, those dark trees whipping in the wind, the mists always drifting, cold greyness everywhere, *danger* . . ."

They were flashing along above the sea, now and then glimpsing the heaving silvery waters through a break in the dunes, or where the wind-battered trees dropped away. Rounding a curve they saw below them the lovely half moon of White Bay, waves lashed with white caps inside the barrier reef. Beyond clustered the coloured houses of the town against a backdrop of indigo mountains.

"Coral Cove Inn is just the other side of White Bay."

"There will be lights and people laughing," she said wistfully. "I need that."

Beyond the town the road burrowed into a dense green tunnel of pine. Here and there an arm of sandy road stretched out to the sea. Suddenly Dolores' fingers clutched his wrist.

"Stark . . ."

He flung her a quick glance. "What is it?"

"That car—back in that side road almost hidden in the pines . . ."

His foot stabbed the brake and they skidded to a stop.
"What's wrong with it?"

"Stark, it's *Joanne's car*, and Joanne is sitting at the wheel—with a *man*."

"A *man*?" He stepped on the starter. "We'll run back and have a look-see, if I can find a place to turn."

A quarter of a mile ahead he found a turn-out and headed back driving slowly.

"I don't want her to see us, Stark, for I don't mean to spy, but I didn't think she knew anyone down here. There must be some perfectly ordinary explanation."

"She doesn't know my car. It's wiser to know than to worry, isn't it?"

He recognised the blue-and-white Pontiac the moment he glimpsed it—nosed deep in the shadows of the pines in a dead-end road. The woman, lovely profile turned to them, was unmistakably Dolores' stepmother. She was conversing earnestly with the man seated beside her.

Connister drew a sharp breath as they rolled past and the pines hid them again from view. "Well, *well*!"

"Who in the world can that man be, Stark?"

"The last one I'd ever expect to see her with."

"Do you know him?"

"Rocky Nelson," he said.

Incredulously she stared at him. "*Rocky Nelson*, the agate shop owner?"

He found a place to turn again and they sped back. When they reached the side road they caught another glimpse of the man and the woman, seemingly oblivious to the world. Connister felt intense amazement. "What possible connection can there be between Rocky Nelson and your father's wife?"

"There's probably a very simple answer," Dolores persisted. "I'm certain Joanne never met Mr. Nelson before."

"She told Sheriff Ridell that she knew absolutely no one down here. And she has had very little time, nor would I think, inclination, to shop for curios since her arrival."

"She must have some important reason for talking with him, Stark."

"Did she appear unusually disturbed after you left White Bay? More than the inquest would have warranted, I mean."

The girl shrugged helplessly. "It's difficult to tell with Joanne. She's never been open or confiding. I did think it a little odd that she should decide to drive right back to White Bay alone, after we reached home. I told her I wouldn't have minded waiting while she did a little shopping when we were there. But she rather—brushed me off."

"She was undoubtedly headed for a rendezvous with charming Mr. Nelson."

Where the cliffs curved down to a purple cove the Inn, stone-walled, windows overlooking the surf, greeted them with the mellow glow of candlelight, music, and the reviving aroma of food.

With a little sigh of pleasure Dolores relaxed in her chair by the window. "This is perfect. I'm *starved* . . ." she stopped, ashamed and shocked. "I—I have scarcely touched food since . . ."

He laid a hand over hers. "I know. Yet you have to eat to keep up both your strength and your courage. Let's completely forget Mandura for a little while."

It wasn't until they were rounding out a feast of fried crab with pumpkin pie, that he brought the conversation back to Joanne Dalquist.

X "Tell me a little more about Joanne. I gather that there's not a very close relationship between you."

Her eyes dropped to the breakers crashing on the rocks below them. "There's never been any affection between us: I tried to love her at first, but she would never allow me to call her 'mother', and I'm sure she has always resented me. She kept father away from me as much as possible, and was continually urging him to send me away."

There was no bitterness in her voice, only bleak resignation.

"When did your father marry Joanne? Where did she come from, and what had she been doing before that? You were pretty young."

"I was eleven, and terribly excited at the prospect of having a mother at last like other girls. I dreamed about our having wonderful times together. I understood that she had been working in the office of another lawyer, an acquaintance of father's. That's how he met her. She had come from Creston, a lumber town down the river. I thought she was attractive then, but

she became much more polished and sophisticated after she married father." Her voice trailed away.

"Anything else?"

She hesitated, then smiled a trifle wryly. "Joanne isn't interested in anything very much except bridge and cocktail parties. She's rarely home evenings."

He caught the picture. There was another question he would have liked to ask, but he forebore. Certainly the sheriff would want to know if Charles Dalquist had been interested in other women, or one special woman, and he'd waste no time in finding out.

More important at the moment was the question: Why was Joanne sitting in her car with Rocky Nelson? What business dealings did she have with him? Could they have plotted together to kill Dalquist? Comparing the two men: the handsome lawyer and the coarse sensual owner of Mandura's curio shop, it was ridiculous to think she would choose such a man for a love affair.

The wind had died away when they left the restaurant, and they stepped into starless blue velvet. As he put the girl in the car he asked: "Do you suppose you should mention to Joanne that you happened to see her on your way to Coral Cove?"

"Oh, *no*. She would resent that very bitterly. She's made it quite clear over the years that I was to stay out of her affairs."

He turned the key in the ignition and set the motor humming. "I hate to tell Ridell, yet he ought to know about this secret meeting, Dolores. It could be extremely important."

"The sheriff? Stark, that would be dreadful."

"It might be more dreadful if murder struck again, or if your father's murderer escaped justice."

"But we *can't* think of Joanne—that way." Her voice was faint.

They headed towards Cape Mandura, the headlamps ploughing back the furrows of darkness. "Supposing," Connister mused aloud, "Joanne had met Nelson somewhere, and impossible as it seems, they became infatuated with each other. Rocky tried to persuade her to leave your father, but she has no intention of that. She refuses and he plans murders, but doesn't take Joanne into his confidence. She will be twice as desirable as a widow,

for she will be wealthy. In all probability, aside from his estate, your father carried a large life insurance."

"I wouldn't know," she whispered. "But I think likely. Mr. Wilson, father's attorney, is handling all that."

They flashed under the misty yellow street lamps of White Bay and on into the darkness again. "Let's go back to Rocky, Dolores. He has to wait until he can make the murder appear to be an accident. Your father's arrival at Mandura gives him an unbelievable opportunity. He may even have had Joanne suggest the place to him."

"And Rocky tried to get rid of me also?" the girl's voice shook. "How about the attack on you?"

He considered. "He may have wanted it to look as though a psycho was wandering around. In that case he might even try another attack on someone to keep up the illusion."

"That's a horrifying idea, Stark."

"This whole thing is horrifying," he reminded her grimly. "The most reasonable explanation, of course, is that Joanne had business dealings with Rocky, but they were certainly secret, or she would have had him come openly to the Blue Tides."

When they reached the cabin there was a saffron glow behind the closely drawn curtains. Dolores unlocked the door and they stepped from the bleak night into grateful warmth. Flames were blazing on the hearth, their light flickering over Joanne curled up on the lounge, the rich folds of her house-gown glowing like melted rubies.

She turned her head at their entrance, pushing back the ashen-gold hair impatiently from her temples. "Hello, Mr. Connister. I hope you don't expect me to prepare any food, Dolores."

The girl slipped off her wrap and walked to the fire. "Stark took me to dinner. Did you fix something for yourself?" Her tone was casual.

"A sandwich and coffee was all I wanted. Sit down, Mr. Connister. How soon do you think that obstinate sheriff will allow us to go back to town?"

He dropped into a chair facing her, drew his cigarette case from his pocket, flipped it open and extended it. She accepted one and he held the flame of his lighter to its tip. The satinated eyes were half closed, the rich mouth sulky. In a curious

way she both charmed and repelled him. He felt his pulse quicken when the long dark lashes lifted and the silvery-green eyes gazed directly into his.

"I'm not familiar with criminal cases, Mrs. Dalquist, but I've heard it's customary to have everyone who might in any way be connected with the crime remain where the authorities can reach them. In a town as small as Mandura it shouldn't take long to find the person who—killed your husband. Do you know anyone down here?"

She glanced away from him, smoke drifting from her lips. "No one." Was it his imagination or did a sudden pulse flutter in the smooth throat? "Let me fix you a drink. God knows I could do with one."

"Another time, thanks." He rose. "This has been a terrible day for both you and Dolores. You both need rest."

"Rest!" She lifted a slim shoulder. "On beds like matted straw? But I couldn't sleep on thistledown—after that inquest." She sprang to her feet and the lustrous gown swirled about her slender hips. "Come back soon and have that drink, won't you?" She smiled up at him, the sulkiness gone—and she was ravishing.

"I promise."

Dolores walked with him to the door. Her young face was closed and remote, and she failed to return his smile. "Thank you for the delicious dinner, Stark, and for—everything." She was a different girl in the presence of her stepmother.

Joanne had told a flat untruth when she declared she knew no one in Mandura. Where had Rocky Nelson come from anyway, and how could he find out?

He was kindling a fire to warm his cold cottage when there was a pounding on the door. "Come in," he shouted, and Ford Coburn stalked in, shoulders hunched in a plaid jacket. His face was ashy and haggard. "How about loaning me a few magazines? I'm out of reading."

Connister nodded to a stack on a corner table, but remembering the piles of books in Coburn's place was sure a lack of reading material hadn't brought him to his door.

The former college professor dropped exhaustedly into a chair and watched Connister criss-cross driftwood on the blaze. Rich cobalt and coral flames shot up giving off the indefinable fra-

grance of some exotic wood. "I dropped by a while ago. Where have you been?"

"I took Dolores Dalquist up the coast for dinner. She was pretty unnerved by the coroner's verdict. You heard it, didn't you? It's probably all over the village."

"How could it help but be? That damned sheriff is tramping from door to door. I saw him up at your landlady's, and at the Jeromes'. He was even questioning the old ancient, Eddie Dulin and Keeney."

"What have you been doing with yourself all afternoon, Ford?"

"Walking," his tone held bitter fatigue, "just walking, up in the hills by the ruined lodge."

The man looked done in. Connister left the fire and went out to the kitchen and poured whisky into two glasses, added a dash of soda and brought them back to the living-room. Coburn muttered: "Thanks." They sipped in silence.

The interlude of stillness was broken by the sound of car wheels grinding in the sand before the house. Coburn grinned sardonically. "Ridell has got around to you again."

Sure enough it was Ridell, Scott on his heels. The sheriff's gaze shot past Connister to his guest staring moodily into the fire. "Ford Coburn's here, is he? I've been looking for him."

Connister shoved forward some chairs but Ridell crossed directly to Coburn. "We've been talking by telephone with your former wife, Nancy Dean Coburn. She didn't have any glowing words of praise for you. In fact, she seemed to think you'd been a pretty ugly unsympathetic husband."

Coburn shrugged, but his face flushed a dull crimson. "Undoubtedly she considered me a good deal less than perfect, or she wouldn't have divorced me. The fact that her own conduct contributed to my charming disposition, means of course, nothing to the courts of law."

"It means nothing to us," agreed Ridell, "if we can prove that you carried a murderous grudge against your wife's lawyer."

"A grudge, definitely, but not necessarily murderous."

Ridell said patiently: "Tell me again, what you did Wednesday afternoon between three and six o'clock."

Coburn gave him a smouldering glance. "I told you I walked in the hills earlier, then drove around three to the White Bay

Library, where I remained studying the Powers and Limitations of Science, according to William James, to be specific. A number of other people were there also, as well as an elderly indifferent Librarian, sex, female, to whom I neither spoke nor approached."

"And who has no recollection of you whatever," Ridell cut in. "Go on."

"In that case you, of course, can neither prove nor disprove my story. I left the library around four, I suppose, took a drive up Kaneah Canyon, turned about and headed for home. As I was passing the Seacrest Motel I saw something rather interesting."

"Yes?" Ridell was all attention.

Coburn laughed. "The widow of Charles Dalquist walking on the beach with a male companion."

Connister removed his elbow from the mantle, and the sheriff froze. "Do you know who that man was?"

Coburn climbed to his feet, yawned and stretched. His eyes were malicious. "Since Mrs. Dalquist seems to have singled me out as her husband's murderer because of a letter I wrote, I admit I recognised the man."

"And he was?"

"Rocky Nelson, who operates the curio shop down here."

The sheriff was immunised against shock, yet a flicker of astonishment passed over the hard planes of his face. "What time was that?"

"I have lost my awareness of time, Sheriff, since I left the class-room. Roughly, however, it might have been about twenty minutes to six."

And that—thought Connister—was no alibi for Joanne Dalquist.

"May I go home now, Sheriff, or do you plan to arrest me?"

"You can go, but don't leave this vicinity."

"With all this excitement raging?" Coburn lounged to the door. "Bye, Connister, thanks for the fortifier."

He had the door open when Ridell stopped him. "How did you recognise Mrs. Dalquist? Have you known her personally?"

"She was in the court-room every day of the divorce trial. I do not know her personally. It was Nelson I recognised first."

"Were they talking?"

"Most earnestly. Particularly Mr. Nelson, who was throwing his arms about and seemed extremely steamed up." He strode out of the door.

Ridell gazed after him thoughtfully: "The man's corroded with hatred, but we've no way to prove he wasn't where he claims to have been."

"What does that add up to—Coburn's seeing Mrs. Dalquist with Nelson?" Connister wondered aloud.

"He could be lying, but why drag in Nelson?" Ridell said slowly.

"I don't think he's lying, Sheriff. I was about to tell you myself that I saw Rocky Nelson with Mrs. Dalquist this afternoon."

"I'll be damned," the sheriff said softly. "Where?"

"They were parked in her car under the trees in a dead-end road, about a mile the other side of White Bay."

Ridell snapped his fingers. "We're doing a little checking into the widow's past, and may stumble onto something. Why should she be chatting with Nelson—after the murder, and also just before making her appearance in Mandura the first time? When you saw her this afternoon it must have been shortly after the inquest."

"That's right. Rocky hardly seems the type of man Mrs. Dalquist would choose for a lover."

There was irony in Ridell's smile. "You'd be surprised the unlikely company people keep. How much did the girl tell you about her stepmother?"

Connister reported what little Dolores had revealed concerning Joanne's former life, and added: "Mrs. Dalquist denied to me knowing anyone at all in Mandura."

Ridell's black brows rose. "Then that makes twice she lied. Naturally we're checking into the insurance angle, and Dalquist's estate." That appeared to cheer him. Apparently the widow of the dead man was a suspect more familiar to the police, therefore more popular.

"How about that farmer who had a grudge against Dalquist?"

"We're checking him out also."

"There is something else." Connister drew the fragment of

rubber from his pocket. "I hope you won't think I've been withholding evidence—if that's what it is. I picked this up beside Dalquist's body. It didn't seem to mean anything until I found some of the yellow clay from the cliffs embedded in the rubber."

Ridell lifted it carefully from his palm. "Rubber from the heel of a shoe. The clay is not necessarily important. There is probably clay from the cliffs on nearly every shoe around here."

Connister sighed. "So much for my cherished clue. But it's quite a chunk of rubber and would be noticeable missing from any heel. I'm a bum detective; it wasn't until yesterday I realised the murderer's shoes would be bloodstained."

"And his clothing as well," Ridell added dryly. "You can't bend over and bash somebody's head in and not get splattered. We're searching for both stained clothing—and shoes." He folded the bit of rubber in a page torn from a notebook and placed it in his pocket.

"You didn't find anything else, did you? The weapon, for instance?" There was a hint of sarcasm in his tone.

"I would have noticed instantly a bloody stone or club."

"Bishop is pretty sure it was a rock, something with jagged edges. Whatever it was, it is undoubtedly in the safe keeping of the Stone Woman."

"Wouldn't the clothing and the shoes also be in the keeping of the Chasm?"

"I doubt it. The Chasm retains articles that will float for weeks sometimes. There's a log that's been battering around in there for six months. You toss a bundle of clothing into the sea and you've no guarantee it won't wash up on the beach somewhere nearby with the next tide. Everybody around here knows that, and they have a special cove for the disposal of their refuse—and we've already looked there."

He wheeled at last towards the door. "Come on, Scott, no sleep for us. Let's have a little visit with Mrs. Dalquist."

He gave Connister a quick nod, and the two men strode from the house.

CHAPTER NINE

PHANTOM OF THE RUINS

THE NIGHT was uneventful so far as Connister was concerned. While he consumed scorched hot cakes and coffee next morning he wondered what information Ridell had managed to pry out of Joanne Dalquist.

He carried his coffee to the window. The morning was pale blue, the sky fleeced over with clouds reflected in a tranquil sea. As he watched, a slight blue-clad figure appeared around a boulder down on the shore. An arm waved in his direction and he recognised Dolores. He caught up his jacket and strode out and down to the rocks.

She darted up to him. "I didn't know whether you would see me or not, but I wanted to talk to you."

"Let's walk then, south to the dunes."

She fell into step beside him. Her head was uncovered and the breeze swept dark wings of hair across her face, but the lovely face was pale and set. "Sheriff Ridell came back last night to talk to Joanne, and I was—*horrified*, Stark, at what I heard."

"And what did you hear, my sweet?"

Her eyes, black with shock met his. "It's absolutely—unbelievable. The sheriff kept questioning her, and how cleverly he drew her out . . ."

He halted. "Don't keep me in suspense."

"Joanne finally admitted that she knew Rocky Nelson."

"We both know that now, Dolores. How well did she know him?"

"*She was his wife!*"

Connister caught the slim shoulders and spun her round.

"His wife?"

"It doesn't seem possible, does it? Joanne is so *fastidious*."

He stared at her amazed. "Joanne married to that . . ."

"She held out a long time before admitting it, but Sheriff Ridell wore her down. He's very good-looking, but he's hard underneath, Stark."

"Police have to be hard, my child. Think how criminals would love a nice soft officer of the law."

"After he told her she had been seen with Rocky Nelson, she confessed."

"When was she married to him?"

Dolores took a deep breath, and they began to walk again. "When she was nineteen—just my age, she was working as a waitress in Creston. He was a truck driver for a furniture transportation company and came into the café to eat. They were married six years, and during that time she studied stenography, and they moved to Willamette City where she went to work for a law firm. She met my father," her voice faltered. "You can guess the rest. She divorced Rocky Nelson with father's assistance, of course, and married Dad."

Connister sent a stone skimming down the beach. "Rocky has a powerful motive for murder—providing he has been carrying a torch for his ex-wife all these years. But why wait eight years to get revenge? Supposing Joanne still has a slight hangover of affection for him, fantastic as it seems . . ."

"How could she?" Dolores cried with revulsion. "Those thick lips and those piggy little eyes. How could she ever have married him in the first place?"

He kicked at a log encrusted with barnacles. "Eight years ago, darling, Rocky might have been slimmer and had more hair. He may even have possessed a rugged kind of good looks, though I admit that's straining the imagination. Yet, since she did marry him, he must have had something." He didn't mention aloud that it had probably been a vigorous passion reinforced by violent and persistent love making.

"How did Joanne explain two meetings with her ex-husband?"

"She claims they were accidental. Rocky happened to see her having dinner at the Falcon Inn and spoke to her when she came out. To avoid a scene she walked with him on the beach for a little while."

"That was when Ford Coburn saw them. What about after the murder and the inquest when she took him in her car?"

"She claimed they met on the street in White Bay, and he insisted on talking with her again. She didn't want anyone to see them, naturally, so she drove him in her car to that lonely road."

"What did he want to talk about that was so important?"

"He wanted her to come back to him again."

"That's the strongest motive for murder Ridell has hooked on to yet. If Rocky saw Joanne again; glamorous, cultivated, wearing stunning clothes—a far cry from the small-town waitress he married, he might find her overpoweringly desirable again. He's a man of violent passions, I'd swear to that. There's nothing devious about him; if he wanted something he'd charge right after it like a bull elephant."

To himself Connister thought that with Dolores out of the way, as well as her father, Joanne would probably be very well off. The attack on the girl had taken place before Rocky had *ostensibly* seen his ex-wife. But suppose he had met her previous to that time, say in Willamette City, and Joanne felt it injudicious to disclose the fact? If she had lied once she'd lie again. She and Rocky may have been in touch with each other for a long time. If he could find the stained clothing and the grey sweater he might know for certain.

The sun was flooding warmly over them. He directed their steps inshore to the windless hollow of the dunes. "We're wasting this rare sunshine."

He drew the girl down with him into the warm sand. For a moment the slight body remained rigid, then with a long sigh she relaxed against him, her head fell back wearily upon his shoulder and the fragrant silk of her hair drifted across his face.

Sternly he ignored the sudden fire in his blood. She was so vulnerable. There was no one to look out for her now with this shadow over her stepmother. He held her quietly, and they watched the breakers sweeping in, curling high to arc and break in a silver waterfall and rush towards them. Sandpipers ran past them skirting the foam, uttering their thin musical whistles. Presently he spoke:

"I'm afraid for you, Dolores. This violence may not be over.

In fact, we have no reason to believe it is. Somehow I can't go along with Joanne's story, all of it anyway, about casually meeting her former husband. How did she appear this morning?"

"Terribly jittery. I've never seen Joanne keyed up like that. She said she didn't think the sheriff believed she was at Fern-rock when father—was killed. But he can't touch her, or Rocky Nelson either, can he? They both have alibis."

"They're not really alibis. It's only their word for where they were at the time. It's the same with Coburn. No one saw him that afternoon. The police would have to prove he was near the cliff and near your father at the Chasm."

She lifted her head from his shoulder. "Perhaps none of them had anything to do with what happened to father. After he fell someone not sane, may have seen him and taken—advantage of the fact. When I went to the Chasm's edge no one could know I was going there."

A violent tremor ran over her. "This same person may have happened to see you walking from your woodshed in the darkness . . ."

"We can't discount that theory," he agreed soberly, "and it's actually more horrifying than a planned crime. Somehow to me the Stone Woman appears important," he hesitated, then finally added: "Your father had been—dragged towards the Chasm, Ridell said, they probably meant to shove him in, but didn't have time or grew panicky."

"How *frightful*," she whispered.

"Don't think of it any more." He drew her into his arms, and kissed her. The warmth of the soft mouth banished from his mind all thoughts of murder. When he released her the dreamy smile in her eyes made him climb quickly to his feet.

"I'm going to scout around a little more. I have one advantage over Ridell. They know he's an officer of the law; no one suspects me. What will you do today?" He caught her hands and drew her up beside him.

"Shop for groceries and clean the cabin. Perhaps I'll call on Mrs. Grier and Mrs. Jerome. I—I have to keep occupied." There was a desperate little catch in her voice. "If I don't I'll—go out of my mind. Look!"

She pointed behind him and he wheeled about. On the low bluff above them a dark-clad figure was standing motionless.

"It's Mrs. Jerome. She—she looks kind of eerie, doesn't she?"

X The woman's black coat flapped about her thin limbs, and a grey head scarf fluttered like a fragment of tattered shroud across her bloodless face. Connister laughed. "A zombi who walks by night haunted by the evil forces of the world."

"Poor dear, I'm sorry for her, Stark, so frail and forlorn. She feels that Reverend Jerome has done a terrible thing—forsaking his ministry." Dolores waved a friendly hand.

A black arm was uplifted and a hand fluttered limply at them.

"She looks lonely. I'll run up and chat with her." Dolores moved away, then turned back. "Please come to dinner tonight, Stark. I'm sure Joanne would like you too also. We need someone now."

"Don't urge, my sweet. I'm wide open for dinner invitations. I'll be there. But Dolores, be careful. Trust—*no one*."

She nodded and darted away, and he watched her go, feeling as though some nameless horror were creeping like the fog after the lithe blue figure. It was growing more and more difficult to feel detached where she was concerned. The child needed protection, someone to watch out for her every perilous step. He didn't trust Joanne, now less than ever. His anxiety gave him stronger incentive to ferret out, if he could, the murderer of Charles Dalquist, and Dolores' assailant.

How did one go about searching for a murderer and for stained clothing? He couldn't push into people's houses, explore closets or dark crannies, knock over garbage cans, and sift ashes. If the murderer was around—which he most assuredly must be, his wary eye would be upon anyone who appeared to be poking suspiciously about.

As he passed the Jerome's Cape Cod house his eyes searched the yard. Was there any space where a bundle of clothing could be hidden? On three sides the beach grass swept up to the low stone foundation. To the east were the dahlias. There were no piles of boards or boxes, no clutter at all. The Jeromes were inordinately tidy. He supposed he could search for loose stones in the foundation after dark, but with terror gripping the town, the spectre of murder stalking the streets, it would be suicide to be caught skulking about any of the houses of Mandura.

There were many more cars than usual choking the main street, and strangers thronged the board walk. Crimson tragedy

had put Cape Mandura on the map. He collided with Jennie Grier as she darted out of the grocery with a bulging bag. Her long face was wreathed in smiles.

"I think I'll rent my cottages tonight, Mr. Connister. Several parties have looked at them."

He felt a pang of pity for her. "I sure hope you do, Jennie. There's a lot of visitors today."

"Are you going my way?"

He shook his head. "I'm out for a hike."

She moved close to him and spoke in a half whisper. "The sheriff's car just left Rocky Nelson's. I'd rather they suspected that low fellow than Mr. Coburn, peculiar as *he* is. I do wish they'd hurry and find out who is guilty so I can rent my houses regular again. Have you heard anything new?"

"Nothing that could point to a murderer. You don't like Nelson?"

She stared reflectively down at her flowered skirt. "I can't see why he stays here. He can't make much of a living in that shop except during the tourist season. He hates the town and belittles the people, and he's gone a lot. No, I can't say I like him."

"He's away a good deal?"

She shrugged. "Either up in the city, or in that house of his back in Kaneah Canyon where he can hunt. He's always got a gun on him. But that doesn't prove a man's a murderer. Well, have a nice walk. I must get back to work." She nodded vigorously at him and dashed away with a flurry of vivid skirts.

Mr. Riggs was busy at the gas pump when he passed the service station, and he spied Mr. Keeney in the grocery, solemnly weighing something on his scales for a customer. There were several strangers in the agate shop, and he glimpsed Rocky, his face sullen, exhibiting a tray of agates. He glanced up as Connister drifted past the window and lifted a hand in recognition. He could feel the man's hard stare following him as he continued on down the street.

In the bus waiting shelter, old Eddie Dulin was comfortably established with a newspaper, battered felt hat shoved to the back of his white head, his ruddy, weather-beaten face puckered in concentration.

"Hi, Eddie, what's the news?"

Eddie eyed him briefly. "Well, according to this Portland paper, the horrible mystery of Cape Mandura is still unsolved, and us townsfolk is skulkin' about jumpin' at our shadders." His faded blue eyes twinkled at Connister. "Anybody been tryin' to knock you out just lately? These big city papers is gonna run dry of horrible happenin's down here pretty soon."

"I devoutly hope they do, Eddie, I'd hate to feed the public's lust for thrills by being battered down again."

"I suppose you would. Well, a vicious murderer or a cunnin' maniac is prowlin' around amongst us—says so right here on page two—and the Neah County Sheriff—which means Curt Ridell, and his deputies, is workin' night and day to run him down." Eddie chuckled. "Sure is entertainin' to see the townsfolk all steamed up a mite, barrin' their doors, burnin' lights all night . . ."

"Aren't you afraid, Eddie?"

"Who, *me*? A harmless old deep-sea fisherman retired?" Eddie was shocked. "Nobody'd harm me. I'm likely the most innocent mortal too in these parts. Curt Ridell ain't even seen fit to ask me more'n three questions about my comin's and goin's the day of the crime."

"You should feel highly flattered."

The old fisherman sucked his pipe morosely: "Kinda injures my pride."

"Who do you think could be guilty?"

Eddie stared hard at him for a long moment. "Wouldn't guess." He clamped his wrinkled lips tight over his pipe and returned to his newspaper.

Connister moved on, and finally the street dwindled into two ruts and then to a trail which mounted steeply into the hills. He began to climb. He could study the village from the ridge. Presently another trail threading up from the cliffs crossed the one he was travelling and vanished in the pine. He remembered Lost Springs Lodge and that he'd never visited it, and swung into the faint track which Jerome had said led to the ruined hotel.

Up here among the dense dark trees the wind was hushed, and the sun beat warmly upon his shoulders. His feet moved soundlessly over rusty carpets of needles. Not a branch stirred. *Then all at once one did.* He whirled at the sharp crackling of a limb

off somewhere to his right. Standing motionless he heard again the unmistakable dry snapping of twigs and the rustle of boughs as someone, or some animal, moved stealthily through the undergrowth.

Abruptly the sound ceased. Connister moved on and in a moment heard again the stirring of something accompanying him. An undercover of thickly-foliaged manzanita mingled its silvery leaves with the salah, and the yellow dazzle of sunlight made deeper the wells of shadow beneath the pines. A man could be moving a few feet away yet be invisible. He went on climbing. The sounds ceased again. Presently he encountered writhing, twisting vines of wild blackberry.

Advancing with caution he lifted aside the spiny brakes still heavy with clusters of purple-black fruit. Here and there he was forced to drop to his knees and crawl beneath them, and the fragrance of sun-distilled wine rose from the over-ripe berries. The vine-tangled trail testified to the fact that no one came here frequently.

He advanced warily, listening every few minutes for the mysterious movements he had heard before. It could have been his imagination, for now he heard only the faint drone of bees and the rustle of leaves. Fifteen minutes later he stepped out into an open grassy level and faced the decaying ruins of Lost Springs Lodge.

The gaunt structure built of massive logs black with age stood in a jungle of shrubbery against a blue-green background of coastal forest. The rotting pillars of a long veranda supported a roof burdened with moss and white-flowering vines. A portion of the building was partially caved in.

He set foot warily on the heavy planks of the porch, and his light steps echoed like claps of thunder in the stillness. The musty odour of ruin and decay hung in the air. He halted and looked out and down across the tops of the trees. The dark shoulders of the Stone Woman and swirling white water were visible, and beyond shimmered the rich multi-blues of the sea. Lucky people, those guests of long ago who had lounged here.

He swung back and peered through vacant windows into dim, cavernous rooms, into an old parlour, the mantle of its great fireplace eerily draped with cobwebs. The room opened into a hall whose carved double doors sagged on broken hinges. A

staircase silvered with untrodden dust mounted upwards to unknown regions of decay.

Farther on, shattered crockery and window glass littering the mouldering remnants of a carpet in a long room testified to a once gracious dining-hall.

Somewhere a board creaked. He froze. Perhaps he'd been followed after all. Nothing stirred. The sun-steeped silence deepened around him. He took a cautious stride into the dining-hall. There on the veranda he was plainly visible its entire length. It was a minute or two before his eyes became accustomed to the sudden gloom of the interior. When light returned to them they focused on a pair of large brown Oxfords immediately to the right of the doorway.

At the same instant that their significance registered on his brain a dark hulk crashed with bull force against him. There was a violent hammering of footsteps, a clatter of crockery—and a figure lunged out into the daylight. Connister drove a fist into empty air—and felt himself plunging backward. Desperately he fought for balance, reeled heavily around—and the floor heaved up to meet him.

The damp smell of mould was in his nostrils; his face was pressed to the cold fabric of a carpet whose brown pattern writhed unpleasantly like snakes before his eyes. Gingerly he shifted his body, then lifted his head—and groaned, it was pounding again, but he had not, thank God, been battered with a rock.

Struggling up he realised his head must have struck the heavy bench close by as he went down, and he'd blacked out. At the moment he lacked the slightest inclination to spring up and charge after the other visitor to the old lodge. He staggered to his feet and out into the warmth of sunshine, staring groggily about him.

The afternoon slumbered drowsily. A bird trilled from the top of a gable above him, and the murmur of the surf was softly audible. He inhaled the rich spice of the blackberries. Who ever had followed him and crashed past him when he ventured too close to his place of concealment, had undoubtedly departed. However, to be on the safe side he hunted about and found a heavy length of pipe and armed himself, then made his way among the grappling vines, peering from a safe distance into the

shambles of other old rooms. If he'd been followed from the village, as he suspected, why hadn't he been murdered as he lay insensible?

Until he had a gun on him he'd forgo exploration of the rear and upper chambers with their treacherous floors and possibly deadly closets, as well as the dank cellars probably lying beneath him. He attempted to recapture a picture of the man who had bulldozed his way past him, but all his brain could conjure up was an unhelpful impression of dark clothing; someone of average height and build.

He set off down towards the village through a thin mist clouding up now from the sea. Rocky Nelson had been in his shop when Connister passed. That eliminated him. Or did it? He could have left the shop immediately and bolted up through the woods after Connister. What was Ford Coburn doing at the time? Also the Reverend Jerome, who knew so much about the lodge and had a cream jug from the dining-hall on his living-room table.

Incidentally, returning to Coburn, could he have a less innocent reason for living in Cape Mandura than he admitted? A secret purpose which kept him forever vigilant, haunting the hills and the dark night roads?

He swerved, avoiding blackberry spines, still giddy from the impact of the bench on his already injured head. He'd make for the cottage and a stiff bracer of Scotch. The descent seemed endless.

Ahead of him the path twisted out of sight in a grey jungle of manzanita, and the ground fell away steeply beneath his feet. In an open space a glimmer of silver caught his eye and he swerved dizzily out of his way to investigate. It was an overturned pail from which blackberries were spilling. A warning chill ran over him.

Slowly he swung about, every muscle taut, moved a few steps then halted abruptly. A crumpled heap of clothing was lying a few feet from the blackberry thickets. He cut through the bracken and bent over an inert form sprawled half under the spreading green vines. Gently he turned it over, though he had already guessed who it was.

Under an old red cap the blanched face of his landlady stared up at him. Blood trickled from a wound behind one ear. He laid

his head to her breast. There was a barely audible throb.

He climbed to his feet. He'd have to get help quickly, and he had no alternative but to leave the woman alone while he went for someone to help carry her home. With swift strides he set off.

The first person he encountered when he reached the road was Healy Riggs. The boy was hunched on a log fiddling with some fishing tackle. Connister called to him:

"Healy, there has been an accident. Come and give me a hand quickly, will you?"

Healy dropped the fishing rod and sat an instant silent, staring hard, then he sprang up, all animation. "An accident? What kind of accident?" Breathlessly he followed Connister.

"Mrs. Grier has been—injured. I'll need help to carry her to her house."

"What happened to her, Mr. Connister? Did somebody knock her over the head?"

He eyed the boy sharply. "I don't know for certain. We'll get her home and call Doctor Bishop."

When they reached the woman Healy stood silent gazing down at her, finally he said, with no great compassion in his voice: "Sure does look like somebody took a hard crack at her."

"From behind," Connister said grimly. "She was evidently unsuspectingly picking berries."

"I wonder if she'll know who did it?" The lad frowned. "Do you suppose she saw him? You'd have thought that blow would have killed her."

"Her assailant probably thought it had."

Healy appeared open enough, yet it was difficult to tell with kids what was going on in their minds. Apparent callousness was often assumed. "We'll know later when and *if*—she comes around, whether she saw who struck her."

Jennie Grier must not be left alone a single moment. Carefully they lifted the unconscious woman.

"Where have you been the last two hours, Healy?"

"Sitting on that log most of the time trying to fix my darned reel."

"For *two hours*? Did you see anyone going up into the woods?"

"Nope, but I wasn't looking. Say, she's heavy, isn't she?"

"Be careful," Connister warned. "Walk slowly." As he kicked open the gate of Jennie's house Dolores came flying up the road. Mrs. Jerome hastening after her.

"What happened. Oh, Stark, what *happened*?"

"Mrs. Grier has been injured. Call Doctor Bishop, Dolores." Sombrely he met her terrified eyes. "And also Sheriff Ridell."

Mrs. Jerome's hands flew to her twitching mouth. "This is dreadful, simply dreadful. I—I just returned from a walk in the woods up there with Wellsley. He is still up there somewhere. He walked on, but I turned back because I grew tired. Mr. Connister," she began wringing her hands. "Wellsley—he may be *killed* too."

CHAPTER TEN

WHISPERING TERROR

THEY SETTLED Mrs. Grier in her bedroom, and Dolores and Mrs. Jerome remained at her side until the arrival of Doctor Bishop. A stout, dark man with curly grey hair, the doctor possessed a pleasant voice and manner, something, that for some reason Connister assumed to be out of character for a coroner. After his examination the physician said the woman had suffered a concussion such as might have been inflicted by a glancing blow.

"It could have been caused by a cudgel of wood or—the butt of a gun. If you'll wrap her in blankets I'll drive her to the hospital where we can take X-rays to determine the extent of the injury."

He gave Connister an appraising glance as he walked back into the kitchen. "What happened to *you*?"

"He's been injured too, Doctor," Dolores said. Her sharp concern was pleasant.

"I think I routed the same guy who knocked out Mrs. Grier. But he didn't have time to attack me." Gingerly Connister touched his head, adding with mortification, "I butted a wooden bench with my skull when I crashed. I was exploring the old Lost Springs Lodge."

"You've already suffered one blow on the head," the doctor unnecessarily reminded him. "Let's have a look at you." The sensitive fingers went to work. "Lucky you've got a good heavy thatch of hair, young man. I'll put a patch on you. You've opened the old wound. I suggest you go home to bed."

With the unpleasant sensation that his skull might explode, Connister swayed to his feet. "The comforting thing about all this is, Doc, that I'm down here to relax and rest."

"You're certainly working hard at it. Did anyone notify Ridell? Both attacks could well be attempted murder, after what has already occurred down here."

"I telephoned him," Dolores said.

The sheriff arrived while they were preparing to transfer the injured woman to the doctor's car. He had a few words with the coroner then bent over Jennie Grier. She was conscious and moaning, her face ashen.

"Mrs. Grier, did you see who struck you?"

Terror flared in the woman's eyes. "I was—picking berries . . . heard something—behind—me . . . had no time—something—hit me . . ." her voice trailed away.

"You can take her, Bishop," Ridell said. "I'll talk to Connister."

"Take it easy with him, Curt, he's had a severe fall. Appears to have run into someone who didn't want to be encountered up at the ruined hotel."

"Another attack on Connister?" Ridell's tone was flinty. He swung about to Connister, who related what little he knew, while Mrs. Jerome hung with desperate anxiety on each word, and Dolores watched his face with soft anxious eyes.

"It's odd how you're usually around when something happens, Connister." Ridell strode to the door and motioned to his deputy. "I'll get some men up there to comb that territory; the fellow may still be around, unless," he added, "he has already *returned to the town.*"

They all stared mutely at the sheriff. Mrs. Jerome pressed shaking hands to her thin cheeks. "Sheriff, my husband went for a walk up in that direction. Something may have happened to him."

Ridell studied her thoughtfully. "We'll look for him, Mrs. Jerome."

While the deputy was calling State Police Headquarters by radio, the sheriff questioned Healy, who was hovering by the rear door. Healy had seen nothing, had done nothing, according to him—except attempt to repair his broken fishing reel. Ridell told him to go home.

The doctor drove away with Mrs. Grier. Dolores insisted on taking Mrs. Jerome to the Blue Tides until her husband returned, and the sheriff escorted Connister to his cottage, a courtesy

Connister suspected that was not prompted by solicitude. Scott, undoubtedly on official orders, drove on up to Ford Coburn's.

The moment the door closed on the grey fog of Mandura, Connister made for his bottle of Scotch. "Will you have a drink, Sheriff?"

A little regretfully Ridell shook his head. "Thanks, no."

The warmth of the fiery liquor surged through him and he felt a little better. "I don't think there's much doubt now about a homicidal maniac wandering around. What's the next step?"

"Let's think back," suggested the other. "Did you see anyone at all on your way up to the hotel?"

"No one. But I was certain I heard someone moving in the trees near me, as though they were shadowing me."

"You didn't get a glimpse of this guy who slammed past you?"

"No. The room was dim, and my eyes were blinded from the sunlight outside. All I saw was a pair of feet in brown Oxfords. I froze, and the next moment somebody hurtled past me, knocking me into a tail spin, and I was on my way to the floor."

"He probably heard you coming and dived when you turned in where he stood. It seems likely that he ran into Mrs. Grier while he was getting way from you, if he were under the impression you were pursuing him, and slugged the woman—before she could recognise him."

"Recognise him?" The words carried a forbidding ring.

Steps pounded upon the porch and Scott pushed open the door. "I've raked all around the Coburn place. He's not there, and no one I've questioned has seen him."

"That's two we can't account for, unless the State boys bring in Jerome."

"Good Lord, you couldn't seriously suspect the ex-parson?" Connister protested. "That timid little guy." He failed to mention that he'd entertained suspicions of him also.

"We checked with his dentist, Dr. Pierce," Ridell answered dryly. "Jerome failed to keep his dental appointment. He told us that Pierce had been called out of town, but he was in his office. Jerome claims he spent the afternoon strolling about, and we can't prove he didn't."

"Jerome also told his wife that Dr. Pierce had been called

out of town," Connister added thoughtfully, "Rocky Nelson was in his shop when I walked past on my way up to the lodge, but he could have slipped out and had Healy take his place for a short time, Sheriff. Healy was less than a block up the road fooling with his fishing rod."

"Healy," mused Ridell, tapping his notebook with a pencil. "A kid with a yen for a live town."

"He's sure got one now."

"As a matter of fact the town has been pretty lively ever since you arrived, Connister."

Connister quirked an eyebrow inquiringly. He didn't appreciate the cool implication, nor the speculative hazel gaze upon him. "Rocky is my candidate for the criminal."

Ridell shrugged. "He's not in the clear. He was married to Dalquist's wife. He is plainly still very much in love with her. We don't know where he was at the time of the murder, and it would be to his advantage to have Mrs. Dalquist's stepdaughter out of the way. That is, if the widow would consent to marry him again. If the girl isn't around the stepmother gets all of Dalquist's estate: cars, some building lots, money and insurance. If she is around Dolores gets two-thirds of everything, except the insurance. Wilson, the Dalquist attorney says there's no secret about the will."

Connister had slumped into a deep chair. He sprang to his feet. "Good God, talk about strong motives! Dolores Dalquist could be in the most deadly danger."

Ridell nodded. "However, there's one little hitch."

"What's that?"

"Mrs. Dalquist swears she doesn't want anything to do with Nelson, and has told him so."

"She could be lying, and she still might want her stepdaughter dead, and Rocky's help in bringing that event to pass."

"Quite true. We're not taking anything for granted."

Connister had another thought: "What about this secretary of Dalquist's? Secretaries go off their rockers sometimes about their employers."

"Mrs. Sanderson is a happily married woman. Also, she was in Seattle visiting her mother as we have determined, at the time her employer was killed."

"Well, that seems to take care of *that*."

Ridell departed then, and Connister forcibly turned off his thoughts and went to bed.

Wind storming about the house awakened him. When he moved pain shot through his skull, but he felt immeasurably better. Cold violet-grey light against the windows told him darkness was not far off. He'd still have time to present himself at the Blue Tides for dinner.

He shaved and dressed listening to the wind. Under its impact the cottage creaked and trembled. Sudden rain lashed the panes. Battling his way up the darkening road he could glimpse the seething white line of surf through the wild downpour. The smell of rockweed, dead fish and drenched sand swept in to him. Jennie Grier's house standing dark and silent as he passed gave him a sudden chill feeling of loneliness. But he was cheered when the apricot glow of the Blue Tides windows burned into sight through the writhing pines.

Joanne opened the door and the storm swept him in. "A lot of weather out there, Mrs. Dalquist."

"It's a terrible night. Let me take that dripping raincoat." Her green gaze went to his taped head. "We were not sure that you'd feel up to coming. I'm so glad you did."

Her gown of charcoal silk clung provocatively to the rich curves of her body, but her pallor was startling, and her smile appeared to be painted on the beautiful mouth.

After the savage darkness the cabin was a golden shell of fire-light and candleglow. A table was laid before the hearth, and on an amber cloth a centrepiece of beach asters glistened with lovely tones of amethyst. Connister was pretty sure the delicious aroma in the air was fried chicken, and it reminded him how long it had been since he'd eaten.

Dolores appeared in the kitchen doorway. A lacy froth of apron was tied over her severe black dress, and her hair was pinned high on her head, giving her a look of grave sophistication.

"Stark, how is your head? I've been so worried."

"Sweetheart, my head is indestructible. But I'm darned tired of being knocked about, and I'm going to find out who's responsible if I have to take every house in Mandura apart."

Both women's eyes widened at the grimness of his tone.

"But Mrs. Grier's being attacked makes everything differ-

ent, Stark," Dolores cried. "It can't be anyone just—hating *us*." Her voice dropped and she glanced at Joanne.

Her stepmother was mixing cocktails at a side table. Her face betrayed no expression. "I'm afraid I can't offer you any choice in mixers, Mr. Connister. Mr. Keeney carries only lime soda."

"The name is 'Stark', Joanne, and lime soda is fine."

She held out a glass and her eyes were suddenly starred with laughter. "Our crystal is lovely too, Stark—peanut-butter jars from the Blue Tides cupboard."

"The tinkle of ice sounds quite as inviting."

"We're lucky even to have the ice—with this refrigerator," Dolores said.

Joanne tossed back her pale lustrous hair, and her face relaxed and unguarded for a moment was utterly charming. He didn't wonder Rocky Nelson urgently desired his wife back again. In fact, he had probably not wanted to part with her in the first place. Had secret rage and jealous passion smouldered under that jovial exterior for eight years, gradually increasing in intensity?

"What happened while I was sleeping off Doc Bishop's sedative?" he wanted to know. "Any word of Jennie Grier?"

"She's going to be all right," Joanne said, and Connister thought she gave a small gasp of relief. "I walked up to the store and they were talking about it. She will be home tomorrow."

Dolores tasted her drink. "I kept Mrs. Jerome here until four o'clock, then she insisted on going home. I went with her—and there was the minister. He said he'd been walking on the beach beyond the Stone Woman, all the time the State Troopers were searching for him. His jacket and trousers were torn, and he looked as though he was about to collapse. He told us he'd fallen on the rocks when he got caught by the tide. Mrs. Jerome was dreadfully upset. She said they'd parted up in the woods and asked him why he went down to the beach."

Connister said thoughtfully: "He couldn't get down to the shore from the woods unless he climbed down the cliff. A steep climb, and for such a timid guy . . ."

Dolores perched herself on the arm of a chair. "He was brave enough to leave the church because of his convictions, and

de y his wife, Stark. Yet isn't it odd how afraid he seems to be of her?"

"I can't think why; she's as fragile as a cobweb."

A gust of wind assailed the cabin with gigantic fury. The walls shook. Joanne crossed to the window, pushed aside the draperies and peered out into glistening blackness.

"I hate the wind." There was a kind of smothered terror in her voice.

Connister had the feeling that the weather had nothing whatever to do with her terror.

A faint scream suddenly tore from her lips. She dropped the curtain and fell back blanched and shaking.

Connister sprang to her side. "What is it?"

"Someone . . . A face . . . there was a face—staring in through the rain. I'm certain . . ."

He strode to the door, flung it open and dived out into the night. Inky blackness and the driving rain were effectual cover for any eavesdropper, yet he made a rapid tour of the cabin. To go plunging around in the shrubbery would be deliberately inviting attack, if someone with deadly intentions was lurking out there, and he was unarmed. He returned to the house and shook the water from his clothing.

"Did you recognise him, Joanne?"

She was standing as though listening, strained and erect. He could see fear was all but overpowering her. She turned glazed eyes to his. "I—I—thought it looked like—Ford Coburn, but now I don't know. There was only that—quick glimpse."

Coburn again. Or had she suggested Coburn to avert suspicion from someone else? Why was she so terrified? "Well, who ever it was out there he's invisible in this hurricane."

He picked up his glass. "Why should Coburn attempt to overhear our conversation? If he was guilty—of murder, he'd have accomplished his purpose and there'd be no point in spying on us."

"Of course, that's true," Joanne admitted hesitantly. "Let me fix you another drink. You could be getting the salads on, Dolores."

At the tone of dismissal the girl's head was lifted. Her eyes flashed to her stepmother in a dark proud glance. But she turned and left the room, and Joanne motioned Connister to the

lounge beside her. The strange luminous eyes met his a kind of desperate earnestness.

"Tell me, Stark, do you actually believe that someone is wandering about striking people down, killing—without reason? This last assault on Mrs. Grier and on you—shouldn't that prove to the police that I couldn't possibly have anything to do with Charles' death?"

"Do the police say that you had?"

She bit her lip. "Not outright, but their questions . . . They were deadly, insinuating. Why should I want to kill my husband, or arrange to have him killed? Could you believe that of me?"

The green gaze held his, and he rattled the ice in his glass smiling at her. "It's difficult to believe anything unpleasant about a beautiful woman, yet you might be capable of murder, for all I know. An attractive widow is always regarded with suspicion by the authorities."

Her fingers with their tapering iridescent nails lightly touched his. "Perhaps that's true. You're sweet—to call me beautiful. Now tell me, honestly, why *you* are down here in this dead and forgotten town? They say it's for your health, but," she gave a soft laugh, "a husky, sun-tanned six-footer? Are you sure there isn't a more important reason for your being here?"

There was an odd note in her voice which the lightness of her tone did not quite disguise.

He shrugged. "Taking a vacation seems important enough to me. Mandura hasn't proved to be quite as dead as you say."

She shuddered. "That was an unfortunate way of expressing it." Her tone chilled. "As for being under suspicion because I'm Charles' widow, his circle of admiring women clients should give the sheriff all he needs to work on. Charles had a fascinating way with them, and a few were *very* susceptible."

"That's undoubtedly the first thing Ridell thought of."

Dolores appeared with a tray in her hands, and Joanne rose. The girl's eyes flashed from her stepmother to Connister, and a golden flame flickered for an instant in their black depths. "If you have finished your cocktails we can have dinner."

They moved to the table and as Connister was drawing back Joanne's chair, she said: "This town is hiding behind locked doors now, what on earth will it do when news gets around about you and Mrs. Grier?"

"They'll react exactly as I do," he replied dryly, "be suspicious of everyone."

"But there are so few really to be suspicious of," Dolores cried. "Mr. Coburn, that good-looking boy, Healy Riggs, the Reverend Jerome, maybe nice Mr. Keeney, Rocky Nelson . . ." She stopped abruptly, her cheeks colouring.

Joanne gazed at her across the candle flames. "You needn't be shy when you mention my former husband, Dolores."

Connister turned a startled face to her. "Rocky Nelson was your former husband?" He hoped his tone sounded amazed.

"Yes," her face and voice were expressionless. "We were married seven years. Rocky—his real name is Roy—was quite attractive sixteen years ago. We were happy enough for a while, but he wasn't in the least interested in improving himself."

She shrugged slim shoulders. "We began to quarrel. I didn't like the men he associated with, and he didn't like the friends I began to make. You know how it goes. I persuaded him to move to Willamette City, but finally our marriage went on the rocks." She drew her coffee cup towards her, staring beyond them.

"Did you know he was living down here?" Connister thought the lush mouth tightened.

"No. I hadn't the least idea where Rocky was, and I didn't want to know. I walked out of the Falcon Inn after dinner—and suddenly he was there beside me. At first," the long-lashed eyes widened and showed faint shock, "I didn't even recognise him. However, it seems that he went regularly to Willamette City and saw me frequently. He also kept up with my activities through the society columns—and in other ways *all these years*. He was so insistent I talk with him that I persuaded him to walk on the beach where we wouldn't attract attention."

Connister tried to make his voice casual, "What did he want to talk about, the beautiful lost years?"

Joanne cut into the succulent fried chicken on her plate with intense concentration. "Rocky wanted desperately and determinedly to have me interested in him again. It was so *ridiculous*, but his pride . . ."

"Perhaps it was more than his pride. He may still love you."

A shadow drifted like smoke across her face. She shrugged. "What if he does? Why should the sheriff assume that I would suddenly prefer him to Charles?"

Abruptly then she fell silent. She had failed to mention meeting Rocky the second time—after the murder. Connister took the bull by the horns.

“Joanne, do you think your former husband is the kind of man who would do Charles Dalquist harm? Even take such violent action as murder?”

“You sound like Sheriff Ridell. Roy appears terribly infatuated with me, but killing Charles would never guarantee that I’d marry him again, would it?”

There might, however, be other plans which Rocky could carry out for her, and in which he might be persuaded to believe he would have a part. Women had done that before.

The only thing he’d learned, perhaps, was that Joanne was not mourning deeply for her husband. It was terror, not grief, that had drained her face of colour and brought to her eyes that blind, unfathomable stare. That she had some tie-in with her ex-husband, more significant than she’d admitted, he felt convinced.

Dolores laid down her fork with a shiver. “I—I just know someone not—sane is hovering around, creeping up on just anyone. It’s a kind of *whispering terror* . . . I hope and pray Sheriff Ridell will find out who it is *quickly*. Joanne, are you sure you didn’t recognise that face at the window?”

Joanne rose. “I saw a white blot pressed an instant against the glass,” her eyes, turned to her step-daughter, glittered like green ice. “Why should I lie about it?”

It was unhealthy the two of them cooped up in the small cabin together, when such obvious antagonism existed between them. He couldn’t rid himself of sharp apprehension for Dolores, nor a distrust of Joanne, despite her charm and apparent openness in discussing her former husband.

The latter went out to the kitchen and brought in warm mince pie. “Mr. Keeney assured me it was delicious pie—from the bakery at White Bay.”

He felt relief when the meal was ended. Something about Dolores hurt him. To see her sitting across the table in that nun-like dress, so erect, so maturely aware somehow. Her eyes were black opals without fire, and even the candleglow failed to warm the honey-coloured cheeks.

After a decent interval of uneasy conversation he climbed to

his feet and said good night. "Lock your doors," he warned them gravely. "And don't let anyone in unless you know them."

"We won't, Stark. Good night, and thank you for coming," Dolores said formally.

The rain had ceased but the wind beat furiously against him. He could hear the dull boom of waters surging around the Stone Woman keeping her lonely vigil in the starless dark. They sounded louder than usual tonight—like an ominous warning of further disaster.

He found he wasn't ready for sleep when he got in, and built up the fire. Two things gnawed at his mind: Joanne's terror—of something or someone, and Reverend Jerome's late arrival home, his clothing torn. Where had the latter been? Could it have been Jerome who crashed past him out of the dusky interior of the ruined dining-hall? He'd been so well informed about the Lodge the night Connister had dined at his home, and on his table stood the little cream jug from Lost Springs. If it had been Jerome he must have been the one who struck down Jennie Grier. And if he was guilty what connection did Rocky Nelson have with Joanne's affairs? Did Jerome know Rocky—perhaps back in the past somewhere, far fetched as that seemed? Why was Joanne in such evident fear? Of Rocky? Of Jerome? It seemed preposterous to suspect the latter.

The flames died down to orange embers, but no reasonable answers occurred to him.

A sudden quick, light knocking brought him abruptly to his feet. He crossed to the door and opened it warily.

The lamplight flooded out over the cloaked figure of Joanne, gossamer folds of a white scarf fluttering about her face.

Startled, he stepped back. "Didn't I say good night to you just a couple of hours ago?"

She slipped in, closing the door behind her. "Yes, you did. I waited until Dolores fell asleep. I wanted to talk to you—alone." She whipped off the scarf, moving towards the fire. "Tell me, Stark, truthfully now, what is your real reason for being here at Mandura?"

"For Pete's sake, you didn't venture out on a wild midnight just to ask me that question again, did you?"

She whirled and faced him, head flung back, eyes wide and unblinking. He had the fantastic impression of a hooded cobra,

swaying gently, deadly, watchful of his every movement. At the same time he felt his pulse hammering, and he was overwhelmingly conscious of her warm allure. A stirring fragrance of gardenia hovered about her.

"You wouldn't be a detective, would you? An undercover man, or something like that?"

"You've been watching too much television, but it flatters me to think I look that intelligent."

"You look exceedingly intelligent, and you're *very* attractive besides," she moved close to him and laid a hand on his arm.

The woman was all sex, alluring, provocative. It certainly explained the lusty Rocky's undiminished passion for her, as well as the fascination she'd undoubtedly possessed for Charles Dalquist. And for how many other men? It wasn't unreasonable to suppose that a woman that seductive might be involved in perilous love affairs.

He smiled down at her. "Come now, you didn't brave the dangers of the night just to ask me if I was a detective?"

The fire died out of her. "No. There's something serious troubling me. I'm afraid of—Roy."

"Afraid of Rocky? Why?"

She pressed slim hands to her cheeks. "He seems to have gone—mad about me all over again. I've changed, grown more glamorous to him. He put up—a terrible battle when I walked out and left him for Charles. He was really ugly, and I was afraid then. He'd always been dreadfully jealous and possessive. But I'd simply outgrown him." She shrugged. "That was all. I was through."

"Why should he suddenly seek you out now?"

She drew the collar of the dark wrap up about her as though she were cold. He observed that where the folds fell away she wore only a ravishing nightgown of pearl-coloured silk.

"I suppose it was our meeting like that—face to face outside the restaurant. I could see it hit him hard. He swore he'd bring things around so I'd *want* to go back to him."

"How could he do that?"

With a convulsive gesture she thrust back the coat revealing lustrous shoulders. Terror flared in her eyes. "I don't know—but I'm afraid. *He could have done away with Charles.* That was why—I met him beyond White Bay after Charles was killed.

I was terrified not to talk to him. He's grown to be a dreadful man: brutal, callous. If he'd been like that when I left him he would have killed me, and he told me so the other day. I'm—*terribly* afraid of him, Stark."

"You should be telling this to the police instead of to me, Joanne. What can *I* do?"

"If I went to the police, I know for certain Rocky would—kill me. You can protect me, can't you, now that you know I'm in danger? The police suspect me, I'm sure, of having something to do with Charles' death, but I'm more afraid—of Rocky."

There was something she was not telling him, he felt certain. A darker terror burned in her eyes than fear of her former husband. "Are you sure you've told me everything?" he demanded.

Her gaze flashed away from him. "Of course." She gave a violent start. "Good heavens, what was *that*?"

Neither of them had heard the footsteps. With a crash the door was flung open against the wall. They spun around as a gust of cold night wind swept in upon them.

Framed in the doorway was Dolores, poised on tiptoe, shadowy hair swirling about her face. She wore no wrap and the wind flailed the pale-blue veils of her robe, baring a golden thigh. She stood rigidly erect though she was trembling from head to foot.

"I knew I'd find you here, Joanne—with *him*!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KANEAH INTERLUDE

THE WILD words seemed torn from the girl's throat, and the young face was contorted with anguish.

Connister sprang past her and slammed the door. "Dolores, for heaven's sake . . ."

She didn't glance at him, her blazing eyes were riveted on her stepmother. "You thought I didn't hear you stealing out, but I know you. *I know you!*"

Joanne stamped a satin-slippered foot. "You hysterical little fool, be silent!"

"I won't be silent. You live only to seduce men. You think I haven't known all these years. You never cared for my father; it was any man, any new man—for a thrill. The instant you laid eyes on Stark, I *knew* . . . The moment you thought I was asleep you slipped out, the way you've done at home when Dad was away."

Connister caught her outflung hand. "Dolores, my dear child . . ."

She wrenched away from him and the gaze she turned on him was one of mingled rage and anguish. "Don't call me a child, Stark. I've never been allowed to be a child. You'd yield—to her."

For the first time, perhaps, the fire within her had been kindled. He caught both her hands and drew her forcibly against him. His tone was low, calm.

"Dolores, Joanne did not come here to persuade me to make love to her. She came to talk to me about your father's death, and her fear of Rocky Nelson."

The writhing young body against his gradually quieted. "That's her excuse. If I hadn't come . . ."

"Nothing would have happened, my sweet. I assure you. Nothing."

Joanne stood transfixed. Shock and amazement registered in her face. "You—young, young *animal*! Making such a scene. Go back to the cabin immediately."

"I'll never do again anything you tell me to, Joanne."

Connister lifted the girl's rigid chin. It would never do to treat her again like an impetuous child. "I don't know how you received the impression, Dolores, that I'd make love to any woman who happened to appear on my threshold in the middle of the night, but it has never been my habit. How have I treated you?"

The long lashes dropped. She turned her head away.

"You need a wrap, I'll get my coat." He walked into the bedroom. He heard the outer door slam and when he returned to the other room Joanne was gone. Silently he slipped the coat about the girl and pushed her gently towards the door.

"Stark—forgive me. I—I had no right—to lose control . . ." her cheeks were flushed with shame.

He drew her into his arms and she buried her face in his shoulder, shaken with wild convulsive sobs. "You've been through too much for one lonely girl."

She lifted her head and he kissed her lips and felt a cool sweetness like spring petals. But he'd taken all the lush feminine allure he could tolerate for one night, and became matter-of-fact. "I'll take you home, but don't quarrel with Joanne. Keep on friendly terms with her, Dolores, somehow, but remain on your guard."

She laid her hand in a butterfly caress against his cheek. "I'll do anything you say, Stark."

He left her at the door of the Blue Tides and strode once more down through the tumultuous wind. Dolores' revelation that she knew of her stepmother's indiscretions lent a startlingly new aspect to the entire case. She had known and observed her illicit relations with men for a long time. Only newly awakened jealousy had aroused her sufficiently to send her storming into his house to betray what she had confided to no one about her father's second wife. It had clearly been a terrific shock to Joanne. And it certainly did not make her less dangerous to Dolores—if she was involved in her husband's murder.

What had been Joanne's real reason for presenting herself at his house tonight? Could she have intended to direct attention to Rocky—to conceal her own guilt? Charles Dalquist had been a powerful man. He may have discovered unpleasant truths about his wife, and was prepared to deal with her in a way guaranteed to preserve his own reputation at whatever cost to her. It was certain she would come out badly financially and otherwise in such circumstances.

It was strong food to chew upon. It was also very late and he was half asleep, and mystery no longer intrigued him.

Jennie Grier returned to Mandura the following day. Reverend Jerome and Mrs. Jerome drove to the White Bay Hospital and brought her home. Connister stopped in to greet her on his way for an early hike.

They were all in the cheery kitchen. Jennie was lying back among pillows in a rocking chair, the Reverend Jerome seated near by, and Mrs. Jerome was pouring coffee whose inviting aroma greeted him.

"You'll have a cup of nice hot coffee too, won't you, Mr. Connister?"

He eyed it warily remembering the dishwater she'd served him the evening at her home. "Perhaps half a cup, thanks, Mrs. Jerome." It was at least safer than Coburn's deadly brew. He turned to his landlady. "You're looking quite fit, Jennie. How's the head?"

It was a flat lie, because she looked anything but fit. Under the gallant flags of rouge her cheeks were hollow and grey, her eyes sunken behind their thick glasses. "Oh, my head's all right, Mr. Connister, but I tell you it gives me the shudders to think of someone lurking around ready to strike us down at any moment. I—I didn't think very much about it until this happened to *me*."

"No one ever does," he assured her. "It isn't an actuality until it happens to us. Are you certain you didn't get a glimpse of the fellow who struck you?"

Gingerly she shook her head. "I only heard a rustling in the manzanita when I was bending over the berry vines. It was daylight and I wasn't afraid. I thought it was you, Mr. Connister."

He stared at her. "Me?"

"Why, yes, I saw you starting off up towards the ruined hotel. It never occurred to me to look around. Then—then something crashed down on my head, and that's all I knew. Of course it couldn't have been you because they said you'd been knocked out too up there by the lodge."

"I'm flattered, Jennie, that you should have considered me capable of slugging you."

Crimson stained her thin cheeks. "I didn't really, but I knew you were up there somewhere. Who," fear flared in her eyes again, "*who* could it have been?"

He said curtly: "The Jeromes were up there also at the time you were struck."

"What an unchristian thought to put into Mrs. Grier's head," Reverend Jerome protested, and added thoughtfully: "Everything was peaceful until you came, Mr. Connister. You have never looked like an ill man, perhaps slightly pale when you arrived, but . . ."

In sudden wrath Connister wheeled upon him. "I'm not an ill man—now. I've recovered and I'm a perfectly healthy one, and I didn't come to this damn town to instigate murder, if that is what you're implying."

He realised he was shouting, but his profanity impressed the ex-pastor more than his protestations. He turned stiffly away and his wife's back was rigid as she moved to the stove.

Connister's sense of humour came to his rescue. He picked up his coffee cup. "Since we're all accusing each other, what were you doing during both attacks, Jerome? You arrive home with your clothing torn, and you seem to know this region and Lost Springs Lodge very well."

The minister stared at him open-mouthed. "Did Evelyn tell you my clothing was torn? I—I," his voice faltered, "did a very foolish thing: I climbed down the cliff and walked several miles up the coast after I left Evelyn, and I got trapped by the incoming tide. It was heedless of me, but I was searching for agates and I didn't notice how rapidly the tide was surging in. I tried to escape over the rocks and ripped my trousers, but it was too late so I climbed up as high as I could, and just waited there on the boulders . . ."

His hard little eyes rolled around like marbles. "It was a

terrifying experience, I can assure you, not knowing how far the sea would come up—the water swirling about me . . . I could have drowned. I was soaked to the knees.”

Connister shrugged and climbed to his feet. It was his story, and it could be true. Then again it could be made up out of whole cloth. For that matter Jerome may not have deliberately abandoned his pulpit as his wife claimed. He may have been kicked out by the church authorities or his congregation for perfectly sound reasons.

“Where, by the way, was your church located, Jerome?”

The little man glanced up quickly, his coffee cup half-way to his withered lips. He set the cup down with a small crash and his eyes flashed to his wife’s face, then rolled coldly to Connister. “It was in a—district out of—Spokane. The name is of no consequence. Why do you ask?”

“Since we’re all voicing suspicions perhaps we’d all better start answering questions in detail about ourselves.”

Jennie Grier laughed shakily: “Well, we’re all getting pretty silly and nervy—shouting at each other. I’m going to lie down.”

Mrs. Jerome fluttered like a grey moth to her side. “I’ll help you, Jennie. We are indeed desecrating the Lord’s Day.”

Connister had forgotten it was Sunday. “Thanks for the coffee.” He tried to sound cordial. “Take it easy, Jennie, I’ll be looking in on you.” He went out into the morning.

Light was trying vainly to penetrate a masonry of clouds. The air was tinged a strange silvery-violet, the hue of Gallician glass, and the sea moved sluggishly, cold and mysterious. An unfriendly wind shivered over him. It required courage to go on living on a morning like this. And what in heaven’s name kept the Grey People, exiled in this forgotten region of barren rock and desolate wastes of water, from going off the deep end?

He had several things to consider as he climbed up through the pines taking the short cut to the village boardwalk. Ridell, Jennie Grier, and now the Jeromes, had all voiced suspicion of him, Connister. It was ridiculous, yet it gave him an unpleasant chill. His thoughts turned to Joanne Dalquist. Twice last night she had pressed a particular question, once during dinner at the Blue Tides, and later at his own place. She had suggested he

might be a detective, or a private investigator. Why did it matter to her if he was or wasn't?

The woman was in deadly fear, not of Rocky, he suspected, she had held back the true reason when she begged for his protection. Whose face had she seen at the Blue Tides' window? He felt certain she had actually glimpsed someone. Her terror had been too sharp and sudden to be assumed. His chief concern was for Dolores.

"Stark, Stark, wait for me."

Like the cry of a wild bird the voice drifted up to him on the wind. He turned to see Dolores running lightly up the trail. A rush of emotion hit him hard, as he moved back down through the swaying boughs to meet her.

She wore grey—like the sea and the low-hanging clouds, grey Capri pants, sweater fastened high at the throat, a grey scarf tied about her head. But the vivid young face with its rich mouth, black tendrils of hair escaping from the scarf, subtracted all the drabness from her appearance.

He held out his hand without speaking, and she caught it and moved up against him. He was going to have to watch out. The heart-touching loneliness of the child, and her desperate yearning for affection, would have her believing she was in love. He felt her body quivering against his as she pressed her head against his shoulder.

"Where were you going, Stark?"

"To the service station for a can of oil, if anyone else asked me. Actually, to do a little spying on Rocky Nelson." He held her off and looked thoughtfully into the dark unhappy eyes. "Dolores, I think you've gone too far shielding your step-mother. Why didn't you tell me before that she carried on affairs with other men? Can't you understand how important it might be? Tell me all you know."

She moved away from him and leaned against a gnarled old pine, hands clasped behind her. "It's so terribly—sordid. And wouldn't it have looked as though I were deliberately trying to incriminate Joanne because I don't—get along well with her?"

"I'd never believe that of you, but you do want to know who killed your father, don't you?"

"Of course I do," she cried passionately. "I'll never rest until I know. I can still feel—those terrible hands in the fog—

trying to shove me into that chasm. I hear the sound of the waters—and feel myself plunging—down. In my sleep I feel the icy spray . . .” She closed her eyes, shuddering.

“In your heart, Dolores, can you believe it was Joanne?”

Her eyes remained closed. The black lashes painted violet shadows on the tawny cheeks. “I—I don’t know. She has a wicked temper. When I was little her furious rages simply *froze* me with terror. A few months after she married father I saw her slip out with other men.”

The dark eyes opened wide but stared beyond him. “I never thought of telling father. She’d usually explain when they came to the apartment that they were friends she’d known in Creston.”

“Didn’t your father suspect anything?”

Colour flushed her cheeks. “After a while I’m sure he did, but so many women—were attracted to him that he probably thought she was just trying to make him jealous.”

“Was Joanne jealous?”

“Oh, frightfully, she’d scream at him, then she’d go out and stay nearly all night.”

He shook a cigarette from a battered pack and lit it, taking a deep drag of the smoke. “Was there any special man she favoured more than another?”

“I think there is: a dark-skinned, fast-talking man, very good looking but rather coarse. He’d drop in when father wasn’t home, and they’d have cocktails, then go out. She’s known him about eight or nine months. Joanne seemed really infatuated with him.”

“Do you know his name?”

“Kincaid. Monte Kincaid.”

“What does he do?”

“I think he runs a bowling alley. I’d remain in the room with them a minute or two, and I gathered that from their conversation. Joanne said he was giving her bowling lessons.”

He flung down the cigarette and ground it under his heel. “Good Lord, Baby, don’t you realise the police have to know about this fellow and check him out. We’ve got to get to Ridell. Here are two men: Nelson and Monte Kincaid, either one who could be crazy enough about Joanne to be driven to violence to get her.”

✕ She said bleakly: "She is alluring, isn't she?"

He crossed to her, caught the slim shoulders and shook her. "You're not without considerable allurements yourself. Now, come along, we'll drop into the agate shop and buy you a pretty glass float, and have a chat with Rocky. Then we'll get the car and hunt up Ridell. There's something else . . ."

"What, Stark?"

"It probably doesn't mean a thing, yet I keep thinking that the ruined hotel up there is important in this. When I get too close I get run over. It's only a hunch."

He didn't want to distress her by adding that somewhere in the decaying ruins of the old log building a murderer might have hidden bloodstained clothing.

There were a few more people than usual wandering along the street, but only one customer, a man with two small boys, in the agate shop. Rocky was nowhere in evidence, and it was Healy Riggs who was displaying a tray of polished stones for the man's inspection.

Connister crossed to the counter. "Excuse me, Healy, but can you tell me when Rocky will be in?"

The boy's eyes travelled past him to Dolores and lingered. "He won't be here all day."

"Where can I reach him?"

"I guess you can't," Healy said briefly, and lifted out another tray from the case.

Connister turned away, then swung back. "Where does Rocky live, Healy?"

Healy glanced at him sharply, and for a long moment stood silent, while his customer showed the coloured stones to the children. Finally he answered grudgingly: "Up Kaneah Canyon, red house, about six miles up the river."

"Thanks." Anyone in Mandura could probably have given him the information, yet Connister had the distinct impression that Healy had been ordered not to answer certain questions. He might be on the right track.

Dolores was hovering in rapture over a display of great fluted shells. "Why don't I ever find shells like this on the beach, Stark?"

"Because, my sweet, you don't look on the right beach, say on the South Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Rocky has them shipped

in. Would you like one of those pretty floats, or would you rather have my amber one?"

"I'd much rather have yours, Stark."

He led her outside. "I'm going to get the car and take a short trip out Kaneah Canyon."

She laughed and took a gay step, and in her sudden light-heartedness she was so bewitching he forgot everything else. "It sounds like an adventure. Let's go."

He hated to quench the gaiety. "But you're not going, sweetheart. You must remain here in Mandura, because I am planning to ask some very plain questions of Rocky—which he may resent answering."

"Oh, Stark . . ."

"I'm sorry, and I'd love having you with me, but this time, no. Are you on sufficiently civil terms with Joanne this morning to stay with her while I'm gone?"

"She won't speak to me, and I don't care to have her anyway. I'll be so thankful after the funeral, when we can leave. I will never live with Joanne again, Stark. Last night she—threatened me."

They had left the boardwalk and were submerged again in the cold blue half-light of the wind-rent woods. Connister wheeled sharply to face her. "*Threatened* you?"

"She said—that something terrible might happen to me—if I told you or anyone about Monte Kincaid. You must never let her know I did tell you, Stark. She said, and of course it's true, that the sheriff might leap to the conclusion that she had something to do with father's death. I'm sure she didn't, because in her own way I suppose she loved him."

"That kind of love has killed a shocking number of people down through the ages, my pet. Now, why not go to my cabin and wait for me? There's books and magazines." He had another thought. "Jennie Grier is home. Why not slip in and visit her?"

"I'll do that first then go to your place." She halted. "That good-looking young man, Healy Riggs, do you trust him?"

"I don't trust anyone. Healy could have a morbid craving for excitement. Even Ridell mentioned that, though there's not the slightest evidence that he is anything other than he appears to

be. He's lived a pleasant if dull life growing up in the town, gone to school in White Bay, and apparently the villagers consider him ordinary enough. I can't imagine him laying violent hands upon *you*. Still, I don't trust Healy."

They reached the cabin and he built up the fire for her, but she was restless and grave. "It will be dark and cold up in that canyon. Please be careful, Stark. I'm afraid of Rocky."

He bent and kissed her lightly on the forehead, sternly resisting the tender invitation of the waiting lips. "I promise to be careful, and I won't be long."

Three miles south of Mandura the Kaneah Canyon road branched off from the main highway and cut in up through the coastal range. If it was cheerless on the ocean front, up here where a narrow gravel road followed the winding of the river, it was immeasurably more so. In the deep canyon shadows brooded heavily and the chill of the dark-green rushing water penetrated the car. Through the open window damp odours of moulding leaves and dead fern swept in to him. The sun would shine in these depths but a few hours a day.

He swung the car around a sharp curve and suddenly slammed on the brake. The car screeched to a halt inches from a tall figure in a plaid blazer striding along in the centre of the road. The loose-limbed, oblivious hiker looked familiar. Connister stuck his head out the window.

"You damned fool! I nearly ran you down—walking in the middle of the road . . ."

Ford Coburn swung about and glared at him. "What blasted fire are you headed for?"

Connister reached over and swung open the door. "I was streaking along at forty. I'm on my way to call on Rocky Nelson. You'd better come along, I may not be able to miss you when I come back."

Coburn hesitated, his black gaze scouring Connister's face. Then he shrugged and stepped in, slamming the door. "And what urge brings you up here to call on that lovable character?"

"Did you know he lived up this bright little canyon, Ford?"

"Naturally. I get around more than you do. About this Sunday morning call . . ."

"Purely social," Connister assured him. "There's a few ques-

tions I'd like to inject into a casual conversation, since Rocky appears to be chummy with Joanne Dalquist."

"You appear to have taken over the investigation of the Mandura mysteries," Coburn observed dryly, lighting a cigarette. "Of course, it's the girl. But if you don't mind my saying so, Connister, you're a rotten detective. Only a little less obvious than a charging rhinoceros."

"Well, a rhino stirs up quite a rumpus, which I intend to do. I admire your philosophical detachment, but you didn't get cracked on the skull a couple of times."

Coburn expelled a blue cloud of smoke from his nostrils and yawned. "Watch out, or you'll pass the place. It's around the next turn and buried about a hundred feet back in a ravine."

"How Rocky must love nature and solitude."

"There's the place."

It was darker and gloomier, if possible, back in the narrow ravine where Rocky had his dwelling. The house might once have been painted red, but its shingled sides were now a dingy maroon, the roof thick with moss. It crouched half-hidden under yellowing vine maple and ghostly alder. Two cars, a black Ford and a late model green Rambler, stood in the grass-grown driveway beside the house.

Connister pulled up alongside the mail-box in front and inspected the place. "Looks rather sinister. Rocky must have company, unless he owns two cars. I'll leave mine out here and walk in, Ford. I won't be gone long."

"I'm sure you won't, having sampled Rocky's brand of hospitality."

Connister's feet had barely reached the ground when two men strode from the house. One was short, heavy, wearing a lively, striped shirt, and was unmistakably Rocky. The other man was taller, sandy haired and clad in a black leather windbreaker. Connister had never seen him before.

"Rocky appears to be bidding his guest farewell. I've caught him at a good time."

He struck off down the long driveway and had advanced perhaps twenty yards when the two men swung about, suddenly aware of him. They halted dead in their tracks staring sharply.

Connister lifted a hand in greeting: "Hi, Rocky."

Their reaction was astonishing. Both men sprang towards the

parked cars. The stranger leaped into the Ford, while Rocky turned, hesitated, then lumbered heavily down the drive and clambered in beside the other man. The motor roared into life and the car began to back with a savage speed that gave no indication of slackening when it reached Connister. Caught by surprise he sprang backward and barely had time to hurl himself out of its deadly path.

As the machine shot past he glimpsed the faces of the two men, both grimly set, and he had no doubt—but what they had intended to run him down.

"Wait!" he shouted. But the Ford went plunging backward, wheeled into the road with a screeching of tyres, careened past his own car and shot away roaring up the canyon towards the mountains.

Connister sprinted to his car and flung himself into it. "Those guys are in one hell of a hurry, for some reason. They tried to run me down."

"And nearly succeeded," Coburn grated, and added as Connister sent the car hurtling up the road; "Rocky obviously didn't want to have any heart-to-heart chat with you. Must we pursue them?"

"We damn well must," Connister spoke between locked teeth, "and when I lay hands on that leering tub of lard . . ."

The twisting road unwound for a moment and they could see the black car plunging through a green tunnel of willow. Connister trod savagely on the gas and took a hard grip on the wheel.

Coburn caught at the side of the swaying machine. "You must have suicide and murder in mind," he shouted. "No car can go sixty on a crooked road like this."

"If he can, I can. There's some hell of a hot reason why they're in such a hurry to get away from us. I didn't have a chance to state my business. One look—and they light out."

"How do you propose to stop them? Run them into the river?"

"I don't know, but if Rocky's guilty, we'll be running down a murderer. Who the devil is the other guy?"

"We'll probably never know, since it's only a matter of minutes before we crash."

Connister wasn't too certain Ford wasn't right. Twisting the wheel quickly enough to edge around the great boulders jutting from the cliff was tricky work at the speed they were making. He could see the other car skidding perilously in the loose gravel, swaying from side to side before it vanished screaming around another curve. The sandy-haired man at the wheel was driving as though his life depended on a get-away. *Why?*

Suddenly Coburn's hard thin fingers grasped his wrist. "Look out, for God's sake, that rock in the road! Remember, I didn't ask to come along on this drag-race. If we should meet another car headed towards us . . ."

"They'll meet it first," Connister reminded him ominously. There was certainly little room to pass. The canyon road, opened up primarily only to haul out logs, was narrowing as the river forced it back against the sheer walls of the cliffs. Tatters of fog drifted now and again across the windshield obscuring his vision. The men in the car ahead were probably gambling on the hazardous road to check their pursuit.

But he was gaining on them. His own car was heavier and negotiated the sharp curves better, and on the straight-away its power was greater and gripped the road bed more tightly. If the maddening road would only unwind . . .

It gave him fleeting satisfaction to be aware of Coburn clinging desperately to the seat. He'd finally succeeded in jarring the man out of his cynical calm.

All at once the rock walls fell away a little and the road untangled. They found themselves careening through a heavily-timbered corridor and they shot ahead, decreasing the distance between the cars.

"Connister!" screamed Coburn. "*Watch out!*"

Rocky was leaning from the window, arm extended. Something blue glinted in his hand. There was a bright flash followed by a sharp crack which reverberated down the canyon, and something exploded just ahead of them.

"For God's sake, they're *shooting at us!* Turn back, you fool."

It would probably be suicide to attempt to overtake them now. Rocky had clearly demonstrated that he was either crazy or a desperate man. Desperate enough to commit murder. *Another murder?* He was certainly not crazy.

But the terrific momentum of the car was hurtling them forward. Before he could stab the brake to slacken speed, another shot crashed into the trees beside them. Then, abruptly there was another sound: a low thunderous rumbling—and ice water trickled down Connister's spine.

Around the bend in the road appeared an orange monster, and bore roaring like a dragon down upon the speeding cars. It was a logging truck, bane of the mountain roads, and it was heavily loaded.

Connister's foot jammed down frantically on the brake. The black Ford was desperately throttling speed. It swerved, swung wide to avoid the great truck, skidded, and struck the massive logs. Like a rubber toy it bounced back, and with terrific impact crashed against a tree and flipped over. There was a sickening tinkle of shattering glass.

"Hold tight!" Connister shouted, and they slid with a screaming of tyres then jerked to a violent halt, almost under the front wheels of the truck.

In the sudden shocking stillness Connister caught the sound of another motor roaring up the canyon. Coburn gave a groan and crumpled down, slumping heavily against him.

The truck driver was clambering down, his face the hue of putty. Then incredulously Connister saw Rocky miraculously extricating himself like a drunken man from the wreckage of the Ford. His companion remained sprawled inertly against the wheel.

Carefully Connister eased Coburn down on the seat, shoved open the door and began to sprint up the road. Rocky saw him and set off at a staggering run. Behind them sounded the screeching of tyres on gravel as another car ground to a halt. Car doors slammed and men's voices drifted down the canyon, but Connister plunged on after Rocky.

The agate-shop owner was weaving wildly from side to side. Connister could hear his gasping breath. Three yards farther along, he stumbled, his thick legs buckled like rubber under the big body. Connister reached him, feet slithering on the wet leaves pacing the road, one hand savagely grasped the collar of the gaily striped shirt—and the two crashed down together.

Close at hand he heard Ridell's clipped voice: "Pry them

apart, Scott, then get on the radio and tell them to shoot an ambulance out here, and some State Troopers to mount guard."

Connister felt the deputy's steel fingers tearing him away from Rocky Nelson.

CHAPTER TWELVE

AND SUDDEN QUIET

SHERIFF RIDELL and the Deputy hauled Connister to his feet, then bent over the prone Rocky. He had lapsed into unconsciousness. His companion was in a bad way. The truck driver was leaning against his load of logs and with shaking hands attempting to light a cigarette.

"What in thunder brought you up here?" Connister dazedly demanded of the sheriff. "You timed your arrival very neatly."

Ridell was cryptic: "We've been on to something up here." He eyed Connister with a hint of amusement. "I received a telephone call, or perhaps our arrival wouldn't have been so well timed. A girl called in to say she thought you were running into trouble up Kaneah Canyon."

Connister stared. "Dolores?"

Siren silent the long white ambulance sped up to them, followed by a State Patrol car. The injured stranger was carefully pried from the wreckage and transferred to the car. Rocky had regained consciousness, but sullenly mute and groggy was loaded in also. The ambulance rolled away. A trooper mounted guard over the demolished Ford.

"How does Coburn happen to be with you?" Ridell demanded. "He looks like he needs attention."

Coburn was sitting up, but his face was ghastly.

"I picked him up on the road," Connister said, with remorse. "I'll run him into the hospital at White Bay."

"Then go on home and I'll see you there later."

Ridell joined the State Police and they began an examination of the Ford. As Connister turned his own car about, he saw a trooper stiffen abruptly then motion with an excited gesture to

the sheriff, but he was too concerned about Coburn to wait and find out what he had discovered.

He headed down the canyon driving cautiously. "How are you feeling, Ford?"

"Lousy, thanks." Coburn's voice was shaky.

"Well, thank the powers that be, no bullets hit us. Maybe this is the end of it, and we've cleared up the mystery of Mandura." He found he was shaking badly himself now, the way he used to after a skirmish in Korea. He needed a stiff drink.

Coburn roused up enough to protest weakly at being deposited in the hospital, but Connister assured him he'd bring him home next day. The intern who examined him followed Connister into the corridor and expressed the opinion that his friend may have suffered a slight heart attack. They would know after further examination.

With his conscience gnawing him Connister drove back to Mandura. Why had he picked Coburn up anyway? If the man died or suffered severe injury he'd never forgive himself.

By the process of elimination perhaps now Ridell would arrive at the murderer of Charles Dalquist. Rocky practically knocked out, his unknown companion probably dead; Jennie Grier injured, now Coburn . . . It didn't leave very many healthy suspects around. With Rocky locked up Joanne might have the courage to come through with what she knew and was holding back.

Dolores met him at the door of the cottage. "Oh, Stark, thank heaven you're back!" Anxiously her eyes searched his face. "Something has happened. You're absolutely *grey*. Did you find Rocky Nelson?"

He caught her by the shoulders and shook her gently. "You telephoned Ridell."

She nodded. "I was—so afraid for you. I thought the sheriff ought to know you might be running into danger."

"You were right, baby. And what I need now is a bracer."

"I've made hot coffee." She paused on her way to the kitchen. "Stark, a dreadful thing has happened."

He was taking his precious bottle of Scotch from the cupboard. "Something *more*?"

"The police have taken Joanne away."

His brows shot up. "The police?" he reached for a glass and

poured a straight whisky. "Probably only for questioning."

"Stark, do you think Joanne . . .?"

"I don't want to think right now, sweetheart. Bring that coffee pot in to the fire."

Later, relaxed by a drink, a cup of steaming coffee in front of him, he told her about the melodramatic chase up Kaneah Canyon and its smashing finale. "We'll have to wait until Ridell shows up to know what that trooper found in their car."

She was as white as sea foam. "You might have been killed. Rocky—*shooting* at you . . ." She rose from her chair and ran to him. "If anything happened to you . . ." her voice was a ragged whisper. With a fierce little gesture she slipped her arms about his neck. "You're all I've got."

He drew her down to him, feeling himself spinning out of control as her lips pressed his, soft and importunate. He made the kiss a light one.

"Baby, you haven't got me. What you feel the need of right now is a daddy to watch out for you." He realised it was an unfortunate choice of words, but they were out. "You've undergone terrific shock and grief, and I happened to be around with a shoulder to lean on. That makes you believe I matter to you."

She sprang up and the look in her face made him feel like all kinds of a heel. "When this is over, my sweet, you'll go back to the city and marry the right young guy. I'm too old for you anyway."

She said bleakly: "I've never been young. I've gone with a number of fellows, and never cared at all—until now."

He stood up. "You'll feel differently later. At the present God knows you need someone, but you mustn't misunderstand." He was far more apt to come out of this Mandura interlude with a wounded heart than she was. "Now tell me what you did while I was chasing Rocky up Kaneah Canyon."

Her face became a golden mask, and it occurred uncomfortably to him again that it was not a girl to whom he was speaking but a proud and sensitive woman. She drew a long breath, picked up the coffee pot and composedly refilled his cup. When she spoke her tone was level and controlled:

"I went in to see Mrs. Grier. She was up and dressed. I told her where you had gone but not why, and she was worried too. She insisted I stay for lunch with her, but I—I was too uneasy,

so I came away and walked down here to wait for you. The more I thought about Rocky Nelson—that he might be a murderer, the more panicky I grew. Finally I ran up and telephoned Sheriff Ridell.”

“When did they take Joanne away?”

“Just a few minutes before you arrived. I was at the window and saw her in the patrol car. What can they want of her?”

He knew they were both thinking the same thing, but he let it remain unspoken, and glanced at his watch. “It’s nearly noon, we’ll run up to White Bay and have a quick lunch and be back here before Ridell has time to get around to us. He’ll be occupied with Rocky for a while, I imagine, then move on to Joanne. Not that I know anything about police procedure, but it seems logical.”

As they sped down the pale shaft of highway between the dense walls of pine, Connister said for at least the fifth time: “The State officers found something in that wrecked Ford, something darned important, and I’ll wager that Joanne is somehow involved in all this.”

“How *could* she be involved with people like that, Stark?”

“Well, she chose Rocky for a husband, didn’t she?”

While they ate barbecued-beef sandwiches and French fries, he pondered aloud: “I don’t know whether or not Monte Kincaid now is important in all this, but Ridell should know about him anyway.”

When they reached the cottage a dark blue County car with two officers in it, was parked at his gate. One of them sprang out and approached him. “Are you Stark Connister?”

He admitted that he was.

“The sheriff would like to see you in his office.”

Connister motioned towards Dolores. “Miss Dalquist will go with me. I won’t leave her here alone, and I’d like to take my own car.”

The man nodded. “That’s O.K. with us.”

With Dolores on the seat beside him they headed after the County car. “Don’t worry, my pet. I’m not being arrested, or at least, I can’t think of any reason why I should be.”

The court-house was a dingy yellow brick building on the bay side of the town close to the wharves. The gloomy oak-panelled corridors smelled of floor-oil and age, and gave back

no echoes to their footsteps. A deputy detained Dolores in an outer room while Connister went in to Ridell.

The sheriff was standing at an open window watching the fishing boats ploughing the choppy green waters of the bay under a white-winged convoy of gulls. At Connister's entrance he turned and walked back to a battered oak desk, indicating the chair across. Scott, notebook in hand, stepped in and settled himself unobtrusively as usual in a corner.

"Now tell me, Connister, what sent you up Kaneah Canyon after Rocky Nelson this morning?"

Connister dropped into the chair. "I had dinner last night with Mrs. Dalquist and her stepdaughter. It was evident that the woman was in terror of something. She told us about her marriage to Nelson, then later she thought she glimpsed a face at the front window when she drew back the draperies. I suspected it was Rocky, and I think she thought so also."

Ridell turned over a blue glass paper weight. "Go on."

"Later Joanne came down to my house alone to see me. She said she was afraid Rocky was involved in her husband's death and claimed to be in deadly fear of him, and wanted protection. I felt there was more that she wasn't telling me. Rocky, she said, was determined to have her back again."

Connister paused uncomfortably, passing over the scene between Dolores and her stepmother. "Later Dolores accidentally betrayed the fact that Joanne had been indulging in affairs with men most of her married life."

He told Ridell then about Monte Kincaid and wound up with his reason for seeking out the agate-shop owner. "I wanted to have a talk with the fellow, and find out if he'd been hanging around the Blue Tides the night before."

"You ran into more than you bargained for," Ridell observed dryly.

"Well, I seem to have arrived at an embarrassing moment in Rocky's social life, and I received the distinct impression that he was not yearning for visitors, since they immediately attempted to run me down in their car. They were so anxious to be gone they didn't hesitate at manslaughter to clear the way." He described the pursuit up the canyon.

Ridell shook his head. "Rocky Nelson has been labouring under the delusion ever since your arrival at Mandura—that

you are a plain-clothes man. He had every reason to be on his guard. He's been living two busy lives. You could very easily have had your rash head shot off."

"Joanne was insistent also that I must be a detective. Rocky undoubtedly gave her the idea." He leaned forward with a keen sense of excitement. "You found something in that wrecked car."

Ridell nodded and a smile twitched his lips. "About fifteen thousand dollars' worth of stolen jewellery and small art objects. The agate shop was a front for a receiving station for stolen goods."

Connister stared at him. "And the other man?"

"Is an ex-con by the name of Larkin James, with a record for theft. He's badly injured and still unconscious. Rocky's not talking, but it's probably James who robbed the jewellery shop at Greenfalls last month and the one at Renton before that. We've suspected for quite a while that Nelson wasn't all he appeared to be. There's been too many complaints about his patrolling the countryside with a rifle. He wanted the word to get around, of course, that he was hunting, to frighten people into staying clear of his place in the woods."

"What put you on to him?"

Ridell opened a drawer and lifted out a blue folder. "A small box which turned up two hundred miles away in a Seattle pawnshop. The police up there happened on it when they were looking for some stolen watches. There was a coral necklace in this certain box, and under the shredded paper on the bottom, in print so faint they had to use a microscope, was the blue stamp of the Nelson Agate Shop, Cape Mandura. The box had somehow got mixed up by mistake with others in which Rocky was packing some of the hot stuff. That put us on the trail. However," he smiled wryly, "you speeded matters up considerably."

"Good Lord, no wonder they didn't welcome my bearing down upon them—their car loaded with stolen loot—especially with Rocky suspecting I was working for the police." He laughed, but he felt a decided chill thinking how close to a bullet he'd been at that moment. "And Charles Dalquist's widow?"

Ridell twisted uncomfortably in his chair. "She was even more difficult to work on than Rocky. It took hard grilling to

make her admit that she happened to walk into Rocky's shop—by the rear door, and confront Larkin James. She recognised him immediately as an acquaintance of Rocky's whom she'd known before their marriage broke up. She also knew he had a criminal record, and felt certain he and Rocky were up to no good. That's her story."

"Why was she afraid to tell all she knew? Because Rocky is holding a club over her head?"

"Could be." Ridell tapped his pencil against the edge of the desk and stared towards the window. A gull had alighted on the sill and was inspecting the occupants of the room with a golden lidless gaze. "Maybe this Monte Kincaid you've just told me about could have something to do with it. We'll find out if we can. Mrs. Dalquist is plainly holding something back."

He rose, terminating the interview. "We haven't evidence enough to lock her up. Only suspicion. We're releasing Dalquist's body for burial tomorrow. But the widow and the girl will have to return to Mandura after the funeral. I want them within reach. We've got plenty on Rocky Nelson to keep him with us."

Connister pushed back his chair and rose also. "Do you think he's your murderer?"

The sheriff was evasive. "We've got to prove it. Naturally, he denies it."

"Have you recovered the stolen articles?"

"Lord, no. These thefts have been going on for nearly two years. Not big hauls, just small stuff; valuable gold clocks, rings, necklaces, diamond bracelets—dribbling in to Nelson whenever it seemed safe for him to dispose of them. That house in Kaneah Canyon was bought for just that purpose. But nothing was hidden there. We took it apart."

On his way to the door Connister suddenly wheeled about. "The phantom that bowled me over up at the ruined lodge? Could it have been Larkin James?"

Ridell snapped his fingers. "If it was James—some of the stolen stuff could be hidden up there, though I can't think where—we've raked the place over. But we'll have another go at it."

He came around the desk. "Thanks for coming in, Connister. Now I'd like a few words with Dolores Dalquist."

Connister paused, hand on the doorknob and regarded the sheriff uneasily. He hated having Dolores subjected to further questioning.

Ridell lifted an eyebrow, reading his thoughts. "We won't frighten her. I know she's having a rugged time. But she's got to know about the funeral, and naturally she's as anxious as we are, or more so, I presume, to know who killed her father and tried to kill her."

Comforted, Connister went out to Dolores. She was sitting pale and constrained on the edge of a bare oak settee in the outer office. Her hand went appealingly out to him.

A little later, when she emerged from the sheriff's office she was smiling, so he gathered that the interview had not distressed her. Ridell was at her shoulder.

"Where are you going now?" The police were still concerning themselves with Connister's affairs.

"To the hospital to pick up Ford Coburn, if he's well enough to be released."

"You can drop back and take Mrs. Dalquist with you. I'll be through with her by then."

Connister felt a pang of pity for Joanne as he and Dolores walked out to the car. Ridell's eyes had gleamed colder than Arctic ice as he spoke of the widow.

"Did the sheriff tell you—about father—the funeral?" Dolores asked him painfully.

He slid behind the wheel. "Yes, he told me. You'll be leaving for Willamette City soon, I imagine."

"Just as soon as Joanne and I can pack." She laid a hand on his arm. "You'll come with us, won't you? Please, Stark, I can't go through it alone."

He squeezed the cold fingers and smiled at her. "You won't be all alone; Joanne will be with you, and it's not going to be easy for her either. Her position isn't any too solid with the police, and she'll have to face the Press up there. Of course, it will be a closed service?"

"Yes. There's no family to consult. I *need you, Stark.*"

"Then I'll be here in Mandura waiting when you get back."

She brightened. "I'll hurry back."

Coburn was not only recovered, he was dressed and waiting

impatiently in the reception-hall. The greyness had gone from his face, and an expression of actual pleasure flitted across the gaunt features when he saw Connister.

"Glad to see you, Stark. Been wondering how the devil I was going to get home."

"You look pretty good for a professor who's been chasing bandits." Connister led the way to his car.

"Bandits?"

Connister enlightened him about Rocky and Larkin James as Coburn climbed into the rear seat. They pulled away from the kerb and headed back down the cheerless Sunday streets to the court-house.

Joanne was pacing restlessly up and down in front of the building. She was as relieved to see them as Coburn had been. She stepped into the rear seat beside him, svelte and graceful in her garnet coat. "I need a drink."

"Suppose we all go to my place and I'll mix a couple of rounds," Connister said.

"An excellent suggestion," Coburn agreed.

Mist clouded about them as they left the car and entered the cottage—to be met by the damp chill of fireless rooms.

"An open fire is the only thing that keeps the soul alive in this region," Connister declared. He set the driftwood blazing, its mysterious incense mingling with the cold smell of the sea. "I never properly appreciated fire until I came to the fog-haunted coast."

Dolores lighted some candles she found stored in the cupboard against Mandura's all-too-frequent electric failures, and placed them on the long table. Their topaz glow melted into the rich light of the flames driving back the shadows, and a little of the strain faded from the weary faces.

Connister brought tall drinks tinkling cheerily with ice. Joanne had slipped off her coat and was standing close to the hearth. The bodice of her stem-slim black dress was caught in under the bosom outlining the full breasts, and the strange pale hair shimmered like silk as she turned to him.

Her glance, when she accepted one of the frosty glasses, was curiously opaque.

"You stirred up quite a storm—routing Rocky from his canyon lair. I don't know whether to thank you or not."

He was frank: "I didn't go out to see Rocky on your account, Joanne. I have a personal score to settle with him, if he's the one who attacked me."

She shrugged. Her green gaze went past him to Dolores bringing in a tray of coffee cups from the kitchen. "Thank you, Dolores, for confiding everything you thought you knew, or suspected about me to Sheriff Ridell, especially about Mr. Kincaid."

A flush stained the girl's cheeks, and she set down the cups with a little clatter. Her eyes flashed like black diamonds. "I told him everything I thought might assist him in finding out who was responsible for father's—death. Monte Kincaid was a frequent visitor to the Crystal Towers. You know he was."

"Just because he's a friend does not mean he could be a murderer," Joanne said with lethal bitterness. "*Anything* can happen to me now, but perhaps that's what you want."

Connister noticed that Coburn was listening to this barbed conversation with what was for him intense interest. The knock on the door silenced and startled them all.

When Connister opened it, Jennie Grier marched in. She wore a pink sweater over an ivy-patterned house-coat that flapped loosely about bare ankles. Her eyes glittered with curiosity.

"My word, what's going on, Mr. Connister? Police cars coming and going . . . It's all over town about you having a gun fight up Kaneah Canyon with Rocky Nelson, and about his being a criminal, which didn't surprise me one little bit. Won't somebody tell me all about it?"

Connister laughed and pushed forward a chair. "How's the head, Jennie?"

She touched it cautiously. "Only hurts a little, but I have to be careful I don't bend down sudden, or my goodness . . .!"

"We have all just returned from White Bay. The sheriff had some questions to ask us. Will you have a cup of coffee, or a cocktail?"

"I wouldn't mind a drop of your liquor. My husband used to say there was nothing better than a dash of spirits to warm the blood, and mine has been icy cold, I can tell you, ever since I was struck down. Is the man in the hospital the one who did it, Mr. Connister, or was it Rocky Nelson?"

He prepared her a mild drink and handed it to her. "We

don't know yet, Jennie, but I suspect it's the fellow who was injured."

She tasted the liquor warily and with a wry face. "Maybe Curt Ridell is getting somewhere at last, and things can settle down and be like they were before all this happened."

Her eyes went avidly to Joanne leaning with indolent grace against the mantel, abstractedly sipping her drink.

"I expect you and your daughter will soon be leaving Mandura, Mrs. Dalquist?" she ventured.

Joanne honoured her with barely a glance. "As a matter of fact, we are leaving—for a time."

"Father's funeral," Dolores explained softly. "It's tomorrow. We'll return, however, because Sheriff Ridell thinks we should remain here—until everything is cleared up."

"Well, Curt Ridell is a very keen man. I'm sure it won't be long. He came the minute he knew I was hurt and took right over."

Joanne drained her glass and refused coffee when Dolores brought it around. "I'm going home to pack. I don't know about you, Dolores, but I'm leaving tonight. Will you drive up with me—or take your father's car?"

Dolores stood a moment irresolute, then to Connister's relief she said slowly: "I'll take father's Lincoln, Joanne, but I'll leave when you do."

Coburn climbed to his feet. "I'll walk with you, Mrs. Dalquist. The fog's pretty thick."

Connister stared. It was the most agreeable remark he'd heard from the man. His black eyes had scarcely left the woman since she stepped into the car at the court-house.

Jennie Grier regarded him sharply. "We heard you were with Mr. Connister up the canyon. I thought you were injured."

Coburn was annoyed. "I was shaken up. The drive was hardly inducive to relaxation."

Dolores slipped over to where Connister was standing. "I'll be back in three days at the latest, Stark."

He lifted her hand and squeezed it. "The sheriff's office will see that you are, my sweet. Keep your pretty chin up."

When they had gone, the girls leaving behind them a faint drift of fragrance, Jennie Grier accepted a cup of coffee. "How did this canyon battle with Rocky Nelson come about anyway?"

Dropping down on the wood chest beside the hearth Con-
nister lit a cigarette, inhaled the smoke deeply, and related the
series of events which had terminated with the crash and the
arrival of the police.

Jennie shook her head, shivering. "That was a narrow escape,
mighty narrow. It kind of seems as though that stunning Mrs.
Dalquist is tangled up more'n she's likely to admit, doesn't it?
Men fall for her, you can tell that from the way that disagree-
able Ford Coburn was staring at her."

"She's certainly the type of woman who attracts men—and
trouble, I guess, Jennie. She does possess a—disturbing appeal."

"It's the first time I've seen her up close," Jennie said
thoughtfully. "And she looks just like those beautiful deadly
females you see on TV. Women probably don't like her, and she
doesn't care for them. Do you suppose Mr. Dalquist found out
she was mixed up with these criminals—and they caught on
that he knew?"

"That's a very sharp question—one *I've* been wondering
about. Anyway, until the sheriff nails down the facts, she's free
and must be assumed to be innocent. I hope they'll pry more in-
formation out of Rocky, and Larkin James—if he comes out of
it."

Mrs. Grier rose and began to gather up the coffee cups and
empty glasses. She heaved a sigh. "Maybe I can sleep tonight.
I tell you, I've been afraid to close my eyes since this thing
happened to me. It's the same with Evelyn Jerome. She don't
say much but she admits she hardly sleeps a wink at night.
Evelyn is a real strange woman, I think sometimes. I'll wash
these things up for you." She strode out to the kitchen.

He hadn't mentioned to her that Joanne had once been Rocky
Nelson's wife, but it didn't seem necessary for him to be the one
to betray Joanne's secrets to the world.

And then there were quick light steps on the porch, and his
heart gave a leap. Those steps were becoming more important
to him every moment. He walked out and swung open the door
on Dolores, wrapped in a white coat and holding in her arms a
great cluster of flowers. Firelights shimmered on violet-black
petals.

"Stark, I found these on our doorstep." She held them up.
"They are the Black Warning dahlias. Of course, Mrs. Jerome

just meant to be kind—but they seem—rather ominous.”

He was annoyed. “Mrs. Jerome’s judgment seems to be a trifle warped, but I’m sure they were only meant to be consoling.”

The girl turned away and he saw the big Lincoln at the gate. “I’m leaving, Stark,” her eyes were forlorn.

He stepped out on the porch and caught her close to him. “Be careful, sweetheart, and be on your guard—every minute.” He suddenly felt as though he couldn’t let her go off alone, and an empty feeling possessed him as he watched the bronze car roll away into the mist. Dispiritedly he turned back into the house.

His landlady was bending over the sink, and he spoke to banish Dolores from his thoughts: “What kind of life did Mrs. Jerome lead before she married Wellsley? She’s hardly a blithe spirit.”

“Evelyn’s folks were well-to-do, I’ve gathered from what little she’s said about her past. And I guess she sunk most of their money after they passed on, in the church, when she married Wellsley Jerome. Maybe that’s why she’s so bitter that he gave up his pulpit.”

Jennie thoughtfully scrubbed a cup. “She’s one of those believers in a hell-fire damnation religion. Just being alive makes one sinful, to Evelyn. It’s dreary listening to her go on. Well, I’m through here and I’ll run along.”

Connister walked with her to the door. One hand on the handle, she turned back to him. “Are you in love with that Dalquist girl, Stark Connister?” she demanded bluntly.

He shifted uncomfortably. “I—no, well, I’m certainly fond of Dolores, Jennie, and sorry for her, poor child.”

“I wouldn’t let myself fall for one of those black-eyed women. She’s Spanish—or Italian, and you can’t trust ’em.”

His black brows rose in astonishment. “Trust her? Good God, the child is utterly unworldly, and as shy as a deer.”

Jennie’s shrug was unconvinced. “That’s your opinion. You’ve been playing hero to her ever since she arrived.”

“Good heavens, Jennie, you don’t mean you suspect Dolores of anything mysterious?”

She shook her head impatiently. “Not *that*, no. I’m talking about love.” Abruptly she switched the conversation. “You’re sure, aren’t you, that Rocky Nelson committed the murder?”

He shook his head. "Those thefts could have nothing whatever to do with the murder, though it's improbable."

"Don't say one word more," she implored him. "Or I won't sleep a wink tonight, and I can hardly keep my eyes open. If I thought a murderer was still prowling about . . ."

"I'd better walk home with you, Jennie."

"No, I'll just skip along real fast. Thanks just the same."

He remained in the doorway, watching the lank figure until the ivied housecoat fluttered out of sight among the thickening white vapours.

The autumn tides were moaning wearily out there in the cold tarnished-silver dusk. Turning back to the warm room he could still feel the presence of those who had so recently been there. Each face rose before him with its disturbing personality—then all he could see was the golden pallor of Dolores' face, apprehensive above the glistening Black Warning dahlias.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SIGNATURE IN BLACK

HOUSES, DEEDS, and urgent clients engaged Connister's thoughts while he ate his eggs and toast the following morning. For the first time since his arrival—several hundred years before—he began to think about the properties they'd been holding when he left Portland. Had Walter sold the Hillmans' monstrosity yet, or found that perfect house which existed, he and Walter both suspected, only in Mrs. Stewart's rapt imagination?

He finished his second cup of coffee. The drama was winding up here. He'd soon be leaving, now that Rocky Nelson was in custody. This nightmare of horror—and his golden romance at Mandura, would soon be only a memory.

Perhaps he'd run up and see Dolores now and then. His thoughts hovered tenderly about her. If Joanne was involved with her husband's death, for Dolores' sake he hoped the revelation would not be accompanied by screaming newspaper headlines all over the state.

He carried his dishes to the kitchen and glanced from the rear window. The sun had not yet topped the eastern mountains, but its coppery-pink rays were already slanting down indigo ravines, dramatically high-lighting the forested slopes. For a while anyway, it would be a fine day. He'd go surf fishing.

The beach still lay under the cold shadow of the mountains, and the air was keen, but his blood sang as he strode over rocks upholstered with golden lichen. A hollow booming reached his ears, and though he'd had no intention of doing so, his steps turned in the direction of the Chasm of the Stone Woman. By the time he reached her the sun had topped the mountains and she was laved with gold. Two white gulls perched on one

burnished shoulder. Even in the azure autumn morning she reared awesome and sinister above her deadly maelstrom, face turned blindly to the cliffs.

He gazed upward also to the hills. Somewhere up there stood Lost Springs Lodge with its sagging verandas and vine-draped balconies. Yes, there was a wing just visible through swaying branches. A magnificent view was going to waste, a view of the Stone Woman, of the blue cape, a long line of coast . . . Could the old hotel be restored? Who owned the property anyhow? The wheels of his business brain began to spin.

The old road could be opened up, the unseen springs cleared out. Would Walter consider it a sound investment if the place was cheap? He was very sure Walter would not. Yet the idea intrigued him. If summer visitors of long ago once strolled those wide verandas watching the surf breaking along miles of moon-pale beaches, why wouldn't present-day tourists enjoy the opportunity also? If there were no sinister phantoms, that is, lurking in the fog to knock them over the head, or send them hurtling to a hideous death from the top of the cliff.

He'd forgotten the surf fishing. Those guests of long ago, who had they been? He swung about to the Stone Woman. "You black she-demon, how many eyes have watched you from those high windows?"

The shadow of a gull drifted across the sun-gilded face as though a smile, faint, enigmatic, passed over it. He became then once more a real estate broker. Who would know the history of the hotel property and its present owner? He turned back to the cottage, dropped his fishing gear and headed for the village, waving at Jennie Grier who was lugging up an armload of driftwood from the beach.

Mr. Kenney was slicing meat at the counter when he strolled into the grocery. Connister bought cigarettes, and leaning against the bread rack, opened the conversation by asking the grocer how long he'd been slicing meat at Mandura.

"Fifteen years, Mr. Connister. That's a long time."

"You're the backbone of the village, Mr. Keeney."

The long face flushed with pleasure. "I have sometimes—thought of that. My store is certainly the meeting place for the townsfolk."

"Was the hotel in operation when you arrived?"

The older man removed pink slices of meat from the machine and piled them neatly in the display case. "The hotel closed the winter after I established the store. I was afraid that I was ruined, for I'd banked on supplying groceries to the dining-room. But I hung on, and found that folks drove a long way to trade here. It was closer than White Bay, and if I may allow myself a bit of vanity, they valued my honesty in dealing with them. I have never cheated anyone."

"I'm sure you haven't."

They dwelt for a few minutes on the profit and loss in the retail grocery business, then Connister asked, "Who owns the hotel now?"

Mr. Keeney rested his hands, knuckles down, on the counter gazing reflectively at the vegetable display. "It was owned by a man named Martin Webster. Loud, hearty sort. The property was heavily mortgaged and the Bruce Investment Company took it over shortly after the bank foreclosed on Webster. But the heirs may have redeemed the property."

A sudden gleam came into Mr. Keeney's eye. "You wouldn't be considering purchasing that old hotel, Mr. Connister, and perhaps restoring it? You're in real estate, I understand."

"The idea occurred to me, Keeney, but I'm afraid it's not a very practical one. The place is almost in ruins. Where is Martin Webster now?"

"Dead, for six years. Actually he knew very little about the place; the manager, Estes Regan, is the man who knows the history of the resort, if you'd be interested. He operated the lodge and handled the guests. A fine man, Mr. Regan. He lives up the coast at Port Nare, must be well over seventy now. Eddie Dulin could tell you the street. He goes up there to see Mr. Regan."

The door banged open and a woman hurried in. "I've run out of eggs, Mr. Keeney."

The grocer hastened to the rescue, and Connister walked out. A long day stretched ahead of him. As much as the idea excited him he had no intention of purchasing Lost Springs Lodge and restoring it. People no longer spent their vacations at resort hotels. They checked in for only a few days then sped on in their cars, the wanderlust burning within them. It might be diverting to talk to Eddie, however.

The old fisherman's cottage was on a side road east of the

village. He was sorting agates for polishing, in an incredibly cluttered workshop behind the house.

"Come in, come in," he shouted heartily, without troubling to ascertain who was pounding on his door. To the Grey People any visitor was welcome.

Connister stepped over a coil of rope and several paint cans, snared his feet in a fishing net, disentangled them only to have a rake drop on his head. By skirting a bail of wire and an assortment of flower pots he managed to negotiate the rest of the journey to Eddie's side, where he cautiously braced himself up against the wall. "Tidy little place you keep here, Eddie."

Eddie had watched the trip with fascinated admiration. "Go-in' to clear this stuff out one of these days. Things still excitin' enough for you around here, Mr. Connister?"

Connister watched the old man's gnarled fingers at work with the glistening stones. "Too exciting. I've been poking around Lost Springs Lodge, Eddie, and it occurred to me you must remember when it was in operation. Where does Mr. Estes Regan, the old manager live in Port Nare?"

"Mr. Regan? Now there's a fine man. I was sailin' for the Blue Crescent Fishin' Company out of White Bay in those days, and Estes Regan used to give us big orders for tuna and halibut. They set a real elegant table up there at the hotel. Mighty rich folks came to stay too. They'd drive up in their carriages and the ladies would step down, all pretty ruffles and trailin' skirts. Nowadays women go sloppin' around in old pants, and I swear, I never know on the beach whether I'm walkin' ahind a man or a female. Smoke, drink, drive, cuss, just like us men."

Eddie thrust his soiled felt hat to the back of his white head. "You ain't thinkin' of buyin' that old place up there? Hear you buy and sell houses up in Portland."

"I'm just curious about it, that's all."

"Even after this bloody murder down here, and someone tryin' to do you in?"

"But that had nothing to do with the lodge, Eddie."

"Maybe it didn't—and maybe it *did*." The old man studied a blue moss agate. His face wore a sudden queer closed look. "Regan lives on North Shell Street, brown house, last one down." He squinted mysteriously at Connister. "Somebody stayed at old Lost Springs Lodge once—who might—just *might*

know something about that horrible murder. But don't you mention it, son."

Connister felt a sharp electric shock. "*Who*, and when did they stay there, Eddie?"

Eddie mulled it over. "I've been around that lodge near forty years. Let's see, t'would be twenty years ago, maybe 'twas in '39."

"But if that person has important information the police should know," Connister said urgently.

A queer smile twisted Eddie's lips. "It's dangerous to know things. I was only foolin' really. Don't mean a thing more'n likely. Got to get to work now." He turned determinedly away.

Connister had learned all that he was going to. He called good-bye and went back to his car. As he climbed in he noticed a brown-clad figure standing motionless by a clump of manzanita perhaps a hundred yards up the road. It looked like Wellsley Jerome, and since he was turning in the opposite direction he lifted a hand in greeting. The man made no response.

He headed for Port Nare, spurred by a keen desire now to talk to Estes Regan. It was quite possible the fisherman had been deliberately pulling his leg, to make himself appear important, yet the way he'd clammed up as though terrified at having spoken out, lent credence to his hints. Of whom could he be in fear? And how could any guests of Lost Springs Lodge twenty years ago possibly have any connection with a present-day murder? He was in all probability wasting his time—but he had the time to waste.

Port Nare was a small fishing town and he had no difficulty locating Estes Regan's house, a neat, salt-box cottage. Regan, a smiling stockily-built man, was raking leaves in his yard and greeted Connister with a cordiality which had undoubtedly made him popular with guests at the old hotel.

Connister introduced himself: "I'm on vacation at Cape Mandura, Mr. Regan, and I've become interested in the old Lost Springs Lodge. It seems a pity to have a location with a view like that remain undeveloped. I understand you were the manager there, so perhaps you can tell me who now owns the property, and who holds the old records. I'm in Real Estate up in Portland."

"A terrible crime, that murder up there at Cape Mandura,

Mr. Connister. It has not yet been solved, I understand."

"No, but I feel sure Sheriff Ridell will come up with the murderer any hour. Are you acquainted with many Mandura people, Mr. Regan?"

The older man shook his head. "With no one now, except Mr. Keeney and Eddie Dulin. To return to the lodge. In my opinion it was never a desirable location for a resort. There is nothing restful about the scenery, wild and spectacular, yes, the great rocks and savage surf, the sheer cliffs and terrible Chasm of the Stone Woman, but we lost two guests to the chasm during the eleven years I was manager up there." The pleasant face darkened. "And now this dreadful murder."

After a number of conversational detours Connister worked his way back to the ownership of the lodge.

"The heirs redeemed the property from the mortgage company after Mr. Webster's death, but I can't think why. The owners are three nephews of his, living widely apart, San Francisco, St. Paul and Dallas, if I remember correctly. They have never been near the property, and it will be lost for taxes I'm afraid."

Connister decided to be direct. "Mr. Regan, did anyone now living in or around Mandura ever stay at Lost Springs Lodge to your knowledge?"

The older man thoughtfully shook the yellow leaves from his rake. "No one to my recollection, but there were so many guests."

"The old records? I suppose they are in the possession of the heirs."

"When we closed the lodge, Mr. Connister, Mr. Webster was in a great hurry to be off to Europe, and all the records and old registers were placed in my custody. Titles of ownership, of course, are with a law firm in San Francisco, and with the heirs, I presume."

Connister felt the perspiration break out on his forehead. "You have the old *registers* here?"

"In my tool house at the rear of this property, sir. No one has ever questioned or cared that I am holding them, but I would never destroy them unless authorised to do so."

Connister moved from the fence where he was leaning, a pulse pounding in his temple. "I'm going to be frank with you, Mr.

Regan. There has been a rumour, but only a rumour, that someone who once was a guest at the old hotel might know something about the murder of Charles Dalquist. It could have been a chambermaid or a waiter, any of the domestic staff, and not a guest."

He flung out his hands. "I have been assaulted twice, so perhaps you can understand my personal interest in the mystery. If there could be a clue in one of those old registers . . ."

"But, my dear fellow, those registers are in packing cases. They cover a period of over forty years. It would be like looking for the proverbial needle in the haystack."

"I was given to understand it was some time during 1939 when the person was there."

"Oh, that narrows it down, of course. That was only a few years before I closed and locked those fine mahogany doors for the last time. That was a sober day, Mr. Connister. And now to see the place in ruin . . ."

Connister waited, muscles taut.

Estes Regan rested the bamboo rake against a rose trellis, his eyes staring into the past. "Shall we got out to the tool house and open those packing cases? Though it's a little like opening up a tomb."

"You may be assisting the police more than you know."

The elderly man led the way to a trim, brown building behind the house, and opened the door on an orderly whitewashed room. "Old hotels have their secrets, sir, terrible secrets sometimes. They are most assuredly haunted, I have always felt, during my long experience in hotel work."

Sunlight sifting through small, high windows fell upon rows of wooden cases stacked against one wall. Thoughtfully the old manager studied the cases. Finally he pointed.

"You're young and husky, you might try number twenty-eight."

Connister went to work, lifting down the heavy boxes to reach the one Regan indicated. It was the wrong one. After careful examination of certain cryptic symbols marked in crayon he indicated another box. Connister was dripping with perspiration by the time he'd pulled it out from the others.

He was rewarded. "This is the case," Regan announced. "The covers are not nailed down."

A musty odour of old leather and yellowing papers rose to them when the lid was lifted. The older man fumbled about and brought forth a dusty bundle of records, ledgers, and registers bound in rusty tan leather. He laid two of the latter aside.

"Let us examine these." He handed one to Connister, and seating himself on one of the cases, opened the other.

Thirty minutes later after scanning numberless signatures in every variety of handwriting Connister's vision began to blur. Sharp anger at old Eddie and his mysterious hints rose in him. No name he recognised was scrawled in those pages. A thought struck him. Supposing the person Eddie was speaking about had registered under an assumed name, or more plausible yet—was now using an assumed name? That would tear it.

"Why—*good heavens!*"

He wheeled about to see Estes Regan staring with incredulous eyes at the heavy book in his lap. In two strides Connister was at his side, heart hammering in his chest. He peered over the older man's shoulder at the trembling thin finger that was underlining two names.

Slowly Regan turned, lifted his head and the two men stared at each other.

Connister's mouth twisted. "This must be Eddie's idea of—a grim joke, or . . ."

"*Eddie?*" Regan demanded sharply.

"It was Eddie Dulin who mentioned to me that someone who had once stayed at Lost Springs Lodge might know something about the mystery at Mandura. Mr. Regan, do you remember seeing either, or both of those two persons at that time?"

The elderly man closed his eyes. After a long moment he shook his head. "That was so long ago, and there were too many guests."

"Then how could Eddie, who is surely years older than yourself, remember?"

"That is easily understood. Eddie had an old fishing smack. When commercial fishing was low he would take people trolling in White Bay, for a fee, of course. He may have taken one or both of these persons registered here. And he would remember. But Eddie is a queer fellow, always was—with a somewhat peculiar sense of humour. I wouldn't entirely trust him."

He rose to his feet, laid a sheet of paper on the page to indicate the place, closed the ledger and handed it to Connister. "I can't see how this can help, however, merely knowing that someone was a guest at the hotel—twenty-three years ago. Take the book with you."

"It probably means nothing," Connister agreed sombrely. "But thanks, anyway, I'll return the register."

"No one will ever miss it, yet I feel I should keep it." Estes Regan led the way out into windy sunshine.

Connister drove slowly back to Mandura. How much actually did old Eddie know? He'd have another talk with him at once. Was it possible that the answer to Charles Dalquist's death did lie back in the past? Or was the old fisherman deliberately stirring the dead ashes of yesterday hoping to ignite a spark and break the grey monotony of the long ocean days?

The door to Eddie's workshop was open, but the place was empty. When he walked over to the house no one responded to his insistent knocking. Impatiently he turned away. Was Eddie the only key that could unlock the door to the past? For that matter, did the past really enter into it at all? Connister had nothing to do, and idleness no longer appealed to him. He drove back to his own cottage, mulling over those signatures in black scrawled on the yellowing pages of the lodge register. He wrapped the book deceptively in newspapers, and hid it beneath the firewood in the chest beside the hearth.

From his luggage in the bedroom he dug out writing materials and wrote a letter to the county clerk in Oakland, California, enclosing a bill. Afterwards he drove to White Bay, purchased an air-mail stamp at the post office, included a stamped, self-addressed envelope for a reply along with his letter, and sent it off. It was a simple way of determining whether or not he was on the right track, without exposing himself for an idiot if he were not.

The Lost Springs' register had set him pondering, and while he consumed a hamburger at White Bay, he revised some of his opinions and examined from a new angle the tangled threads of the Mandura mystery. Where did Rocky fit in?

Before leaving town he dropped in for a moment to sound out Ridell, and found him in his office, but on the point of leaving.

"How is Rocky Nelson enjoying your hospitality, Sheriff?"

Ridell gave a short laugh. "He's not nearly so important in a cell as he is strutting around with a rifle on his shoulder, and he still cries innocent to the Dalquist affair."

"And Larkin James?"

"He'll be in shape to stand trial, but he's as insistent as Rocky that he had nothing to do with murder. Swears he never even heard of Dalquist, and only met his widow once after she divorced Rocky. That was when she walked into the agate shop last week. He claimed they talked a couple of minutes and she left."

"How about Monte Kincaid?"

Ridell's face hardened. "We checked with the police up in Willamette City. Kincaid's got an alibi for that day and all night. His employees claim he was in his bowling alley, but they could be lying. There's no doubt but what he's gone on Mrs. Dalquist, and I'd say it was the same with her about him."

He spoke with a chill emphasis that made Connister shiver. "You appear to have eliminated practically everyone with the exception of Dalquist's widow."

Ridell was on his way to the door. He turned and his keen good-looking face relaxed in a faint smile. "We haven't eliminated anyone yet—not even *you*, Connister."

With those encouraging words ringing in his ears Connister headed back to Mandura. He felt a stirring of pity for Joanne. She must have undergone damned severe grilling in the sheriff's office, and he was probably now going to give her just enough rope and freedom when she returned, to hang herself. Or did he have other plans?

He left the car at the cottage, and with a sense of time marching with leaden feet, set off up the steep trail to Coburn's house. As he passed the pine which had snagged the fluff of grey wool, he reflected ruefully on all the people whom he had noticed wearing grey sweaters in Mandura: Reverend Jerome, Coburn, he had seen his landlady with a grey wool scarf tied about her head, Mrs. Jerome, even Dolores had worn a dove-grey sweater. Hadn't old Eddie too been wearing one, a very old, very dirty one? The bit of yarn could hardly be classed as a clue, yet he'd hold it in mind.

He glimpsed Coburn making his way down through the pines, as he stepped on the weathered boards of the porch. He

caught sight of Connister and lifted a hand. The man was walking slowly, painfully, his lanky figure twisted a little to one side. He seemed none too pleased to have a visitor, but invited Connister in.

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"Sounds good. Thanks."

Coburn led the way into his disordered kitchen. "Go on into the living-room, this place isn't fit to be seen. You're a nice neat bachelor, Connister."

"You ought to get married again, Ford." He stepped into the other room. Books, magazines and newspapers overflowed the wicker chairs and spilled from the tables. Forgotten coffee cups holding cold dregs were standing about in the most unlikely places, crowding ashtrays in need of emptying. At the back of a desk Connister glimpsed an oval, gold frame. He picked it up and a girl's rather vividly pretty face with a small pouting mouth, looked out at him. Was this the wife who had been responsible for the destruction of a brilliant man and his career?

Coburn strode in bearing a battered tin tray holding the steaming mugs. His eyes went to the photograph in Connister's hand. "My lovely wife." His tone was heavy with irony. "Taken at the time we were married. She has an angelic look, has she not?"

Connister didn't think so and merely smiled.

"I assure you she is quite otherwise."

Replacing the frame Connister said, "It was considerate of you to see Mrs. Dalquist home the other night, Ford." He'd been curious about that.

Coburn looked slightly discomforted. "Mrs. Dalquist mentioned that letter I wrote her husband. She said it had not been malice which prompted her to tell the sheriff about it, since she did not, of course, know me at all, and she apologised for bringing me into this mess."

Connister stirred the black and atrocious brew in his cup and tasted it warily. It stung his tongue. "Joanne seems to be a kind of beautiful spider who entangles everyone in her web. I can't make up my mind whether she's a deadly black-widow spider or not."

Coburn swept some magazines from a chair and dropped into

it. "It's routine for the police to suspect the wife of any murdered man, especially if she's beautiful."

And particularly if she has a male friend, and in addition was desperately jealous of her handsome husband—Connister almost added. Instead he asked: "How do you feel now anyway, Ford? Recovered, I hope, from our merry little skirmish with Rocky?"

The man's mouth twisted. "I'm no worse. And while everyone is running around hoarding old secrets, I may as well tell you mine, and what makes me considered such a damned suspicious character around here."

"For God's sake, do!" Connister exploded. He stared hard at Coburn. Why this sudden urge for confession? Ford was not the confiding type.

Twisting awkwardly in his chair Coburn said bleakly: "I'm only comfortable when I'm moving about, walking, or active in some way. Arthritis of the spine. It can be damnable. It terminated my teaching career and deprived me of my wife. In all fairness to Alene, I can't blame her for shedding me, even if she did flirt all over the campus. Nagging pain is not guaranteed to improve a man's disposition, and mine, I admit, has been hellish. Alene took all she could before she fell for a fellow with a cheerier outlook on life."

"Ford, I'm *sorry*," Connister refrained from pointing out that many a wife had remained at an afflicted husband's side, unpleasant disposition or not.

To change the painful subject, he asked casually, "By the way, did you ever visit Mandura before you settled down here?"

The ex-college professor reared to his feet. "That's how I happened to buy this shack. I stayed here a couple of times. More coffee?"

Connister drained his cup with a gulp. He tried to keep his voice steady: "Where did you stay?"

"Up at Lost Springs Lodge. It was a romantic, rustic place at that time. Magnificent view."

"It must have been interesting. How long ago was that?"

"The last time was the summer before it closed, and the other time . . ." he paused, then added carelessly, "was several years before that. The country was lonelier then, no houses to speak of. I'll get the coffee pot."

He swung about and strode with his gangling stride into the kitchen, returning with a battered agate-ware pot. "Sorry I can't offer you a more potent drink. I'm all out of liquor."

"This," said Connister, reluctantly holding out his cup, "is quite potent enough, thanks. Did you make the acquaintance of anyone living here while you were a guest of the lodge?"

Coburn slopped his witches' brew into the extended cup, then stood silent a moment, black eyes scorching Connister's face. "No," he said finally. "There were not many people living here then, mostly commercial fishermen sailing out of White Bay."

Connister finished the coffee with heroic effort and placed the cup on a table and climbed to his feet. "I'll be leaving here next week. My partner has probably run us into bankruptcy trying to carry on alone."

"Has Ridell wrung a confession out of Rocky Nelson yet?"

"Rocky denies—violently, that he had anything to do with Dalquist's death. Revolting as the guy is, he could be telling the truth. Sometimes, from what I read in the papers, murderers are real pleasant people."

Coburn gave a harsh laugh. "That lets me out then. But Nelson is guilty, guilty as hell."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE VANISHED FISHERMAN

WITH HIS hand on the door handle Connister paused and glanced back at Coburn. The man was staring grimly from the window. "Ford, why are you so certain Rocky killed Dalquist?"

"Because he's crazy with love for his ex-wife."

"You *knew* about his being Joanne's husband?"

"She told me all about it. That's the kind of way a fellow like Nelson would kill."

"He made no attempt on Dalquist's life when he lost Joanne, and he was probably a lot more infuriated then." Odd he hadn't considered that point himself until this moment. Another thought struck him: "Rocky would be far more likely, also, to use a gun to kill a man, not batter him after he fell off a cliff."

"It's just the kind of brutal thing he'd do. He's older now and probably a damn sight harder, and Joanne Dalquist is now a wealthy widow. Powerful motives, Stark, greed and passion."

"The most powerful in the world. Thanks for the coffee, Ford."

Coburn's accusation of Rocky had been strong. He'd been a guest twice at Lost Springs Lodge. He knew the region well, yet that didn't connect him with Dalquist. *Unless he knew Joanne far better than he admitted.* A morbid thought chilled him: Supposing Joanne in a jealous passion, or for love of Monte Kincaid, had incited Coburn to murder her husband, then pointed the finger of suspicion at him by mentioning the threatening letter he had written to the lawyer.

Coburn could be telling the truth about an arthritic condition, his haggard face and painful walk would be explained, also his restless wanderings—then again, he could be lying. The

walks could be a kind of surveillance for some unknown reason or another.

At any rate it seemed urgent now to talk to Eddie Dulin again. He swung down the trail and headed once more for the old fisherman's cottage.

Eddie had not returned. The little brown-shake house stood silent and deserted in the tall beach grass. A shutter banged forlornly in the wind. It had been a confused kind of a day. Con-
nister realised it was dinner time, and that he was hungry. He turned homeward.

Everyone was so darned eager to believe Rocky Nelson was the murderer. It must be pleasant to be loved so fondly. Either they really hated the man, or they were concealing guilty knowledge. Their reasoning seemed to be that since Rocky was engaged in criminal activities anyway he might as well take the murder rap too and dispose of the whole matter. No one apparently considered the fact—that if Rocky was *not* the murderer there could be more terrorism, perhaps another murder in Mandura.

Just before turning in he hiked once more the half mile up to Eddie's house. The old man had all at once begun to loom important in his mind. No light showed in any window; the door to the workshop still swung open. Not having the faintest knowledge of the old man's habits it was probably foolish to turn morbid, yet a cold shadow of apprehension fell over him.

His homeward path burrowed through tall salah whose polished leaves gave off a starlit glimmer as his shoulders brushed against them. Rounding a bend he gave a sudden sharp exclamation and sprang backwards. Out of the shades a spectral form had materialised. Slowly it advanced, turning a pale intent face in his direction.

"Good heavens, Mrs. Jerome," he felt a surge of anger. "Don't you know it's extremely dangerous to wander alone in the darkness like this?"

"Nothing can harm me," she assured him calmly. "I draw about me an aura of protection whenever I venture forth, and I know that I am safe."

"Well, I certainly don't share your sense of security. There may be a murderer prowling anywhere about. The police are not certain yet who is guilty of all these attacks."

"That's what Jennie Grier keeps telling me, but she doesn't understand." The woman drew her coat like a dark shroud closer about her meagre form. "*No one* understands that *I* am perfectly safe."

"I sincerely hope so. However, I'll see you to your door to-night." Not finding Eddie had made him keenly aware again that death could be stalking at anyone's side—death wearing the decent mask of an ordinary human being.

"Do you believe, Mrs. Jerome, that this mystery has been solved by locking up Rocky Nelson?"

She gave him a fleeting smile from the shadow of her scarf. "How courteous of you to ask my opinion. I think Mr. Nelson is an evil person addicted to all the vices of sin. For him murder would be only a step beyond—all the other things he has done. He is by nature a killer—a hunter. He would undoubtedly not hesitate to take human life if a fearful necessity arose, and for him," she spoke with cold venom, "his dark passions could force that necessity. *He* would not be justified, in killing, however."

There was a logic in her words which compelled his respect. "No one is justified in killing, of course, Mrs. Jerome."

He felt her sudden agitated movement in the dimness. "There are exceptions to the law: 'Thou shalt not kill,' Mr. Connister. Thank you for escorting me home."

They had reached her fence and the cool strange fragrance of the dahlias drifting out to them reminded him of the Black Warning flowers that one of the Jeromes had quietly laid on Dolores' doorstep. But he decided against mentioning the incident.

The following day he spent alternately surf fishing from the rocks, and hiking up the road to Eddie Dulin's house. By late afternoon he was seriously alarmed about the old man. Why had he vanished so suddenly? Had someone seen him talking with Connister in his workshop? Ridell should be notified if Eddie didn't make his appearance by evening.

He walked up to the grocery, but Mr. Keeney had not seen Eddie either, which was unusual, since he was customarily loitering along the boardwalk a part of each day, visiting with the villagers. On his way back to the beach Connister noticed that the agate shop was closed. Copper-coloured leaves swirled down the half-deserted street—and a sudden bleak wind of loneliness

swept against him. He missed Dolores more than he could have believed possible. A dreary heart-breaking time she was having of it now up in Willamette City.

A County car overtook him as he was striding down the road. Ridell was at the wheel, Scott at his side. The car stopped and the deputy threw open the rear door.

He climbed in. "You're just the man I want to see," he told Ridell, and then wasn't sure he was. If he confided to the sheriff that he was probing into new aspects of the mystery, Ridell would naturally step decisively in and conceivably mess up everything before Connister could acquire the evidence he needed. He could, however, ask indirectly for help.

Ridell's dark face was all sharp attention. "Why did you want to see me, Connister?"

"I'm worried about old Eddie Dulin, the fisherman. He's always been about, pottering in his shop or hanging around the bus shelter. He seems to have disappeared."

Ridell released the brake and the car rolled on down the steep grade. "I wouldn't be concerned about Eddie. He's likely to turn up anywhere, White Bay, the Necanicum, Cleowox Lake—wherever there's fish."

"You're sure it's not unusual for him to—vanish like this?"

Ridell shot a swift glance over his shoulder at Connister. "He doesn't drift as far as he used to. He's past eighty. What reason could there be for anything to happen to him?"

"With all these deadly attacks I feel uneasy not seeing him around. We've fished together."

"Well, if he doesn't turn up soon let us know. How's everything else here at the moment?" The sheriff swung the car up to Connister's gate, and he climbed out.

"It's quiet from where I stand."

Ridell's hazel gaze met his. "Miss Dalquist and her step-mother will probably return in the morning. Stick around, will you? The girl doesn't seem to have anyone to look after her."

"I'll be around," Connister answered quietly. "I hope that doesn't signify that you're booking the widow." It made him feel a little sick to go on.

"We've learned why Mrs. Dalquist has been concealing information from us." Ridell's tone was brittle. "Rocky doesn't want to fry for a murder rap. Apparently he's been keeping a

jealous eye on her up there in Willamette City for a long time. Running up every little while. He saw her check into a motel with this Monte Kincaid a number of times. After Dalquist was killed, he told her what he knew, and she promised him a lot of dough to keep his mouth shut. That's Rocky's story and it's a likely one."

Yes, Dolores would need him. It was a sordid and a sinister mess for her to be involved in. He wondered why Ridell wasn't picking up Joanne immediately, but his next words enlightened him.

"We'd like more concrete evidence, Connister. We don't actually need it, but we'd like to find those bloodstained clothing and the shoes, that chunk of rubber you picked up, was gouged out of. I hope you'll continue to search for us, since you're right here on the territory. We may never locate the stuff, of course, but it would help cinch our case, if we could."

"Doesn't Joanne Dalquist have beach shoes?"

"None that we can find."

A phrase flashed back to Connister: Joanne's voice saying: "I changed into beach shoes and walked along the shore." That was the night she had driven down from Willamette City. Had Ridell caught it?

The sheriff said casually: "Her mention of changing into beach shoes is in Scott's notes. Mrs. Dalquist claims she removed the canvas sandals after she returned to her car, slipped on her dress shoes, forgot the sandals and left them lying beside the highway when she drove away. It's an improbable story, and we haven't found them, but someone could have picked them up."

"And they could be hidden—with stained clothing."

"Could be. We'll appreciate any help you can give us." He lifted his hand and the car rolled away.

Connister watched it grind up the road past the Blue Tides to the cliffs. What about Joanne's clothing if she were guilty? She would have had to change quickly there in the dense fog. She'd have clambered down the cliff, found herself splattered with blood after her crime, and fled to her hidden car. She'd have to get out her luggage and change frantically there in the woods somewhere into that stunning beige suit. Then it would be imperative that she hide the clothing or take the bundle with her to be disposed of later.

Undoubtedly Ridell had pursued the same line of reasoning. Whether Joanne was guilty or Rocky, there was no minimising the importance of the blood-splattered garments.

He brooded over his fire a long time before turning in, examining his own theories and the sheriff's and wondering what information, if any, the answer to his letter to Oakland would bring. He should have a reply soon.

At last he pushed back his chair and stood up yawning, aware above the soft thunder of the tides, of silence vast, imponderable, extending out to immeasurable lonely distances. The little wind-battered houses scattered among the beach pine were probably dark, and the Grey People asleep at this late hour, under the bleak indifferent sky. He'd remember those hours of solitude, this curious psychic feeling of kinship with nature, when he was back in his town apartment deafened by the roar of traffic.

He moved to the lamp switch, then paused as the low hum of a motor reached his ears. He groaned. Not Ridell *again*?

He had the door open at the first light knock.

Framed in velvety darkness, rose-coloured firelight wavering over her, she appeared so lovely that for an instant the power of speech failed him.

"I couldn't wait until morning, Stark. I couldn't *stand* it."

He drew her into the warmth of the house and slipped off her coat. "But I can't have you staying alone up in that cabin, Dolores, and it's too late to rouse Mrs. Grier or Mrs. Jerome to stay with you. I'll never allow you to be alone again until this murder is solved."

Her black crêpe dress was fastened high at the throat, her hair drawn severely back from a face wan with weariness and strain, but a smile touched her lips. "I trust you, Stark, I'll curl right up here on the lounge until daylight."

She drew the pins from her hair and shook it in a lustrous cloud about her shoulders. "It was terrible—the funeral. No one in that awful velvet-curtained room except Joanne and Mr. Wilson, our lawyer. The newspaper men found out—and they were milling around outside. Mr. Wilson took us to dinner, and when we got back to the Crystal Towers, Joanne drank too much. She was in a dreadful state of mind. I couldn't endure it any longer. I told her I was driving back to Mandura."

"That's a darned long drive," he exclaimed. "You're

reeling on your feet. Lie down and I'll get some blankets."

He brought them and a pillow from his bed, devoutly hoping that Jennie Grier, who rarely missed anything, would be soundly slumbering when Dolores slipped home at dawn.

She kicked off her high-heeled slippers. "I'll never live in Willamette City again, Stark. I must get away from Joanne."

"Where would you go, baby?"

"To San Francisco. I can teach ballet there." She was silent a moment, standing in her stocking feet, staring sombrely beyond him. And it was as though he had already lost her—whom he had never possessed. He reached out and caught her close to him.

"This has been a terrible day for you, darling, I know. The horror, the fearful uncertainty, your aloneness . . ."

She rested against him. "I've always been alone. I wonder if my father ever really loved me—or anyone. I—I think his charm relieved him of the necessity of having to feel anything. Do you know what I mean, Stark?"

"Yes, I know. He could turn the charm on and people assumed the emotion they expected lay behind it."

"That's exactly it. But I believe *some* people found out—if they were close to him. I'm sure Joanne did. I—I often felt that I knew, but I was so *desperate* for his love, I wouldn't allow myself to think how casual his affection actually might be for me. Now I think it will hurt less, if I admit the truth to myself."

"No," he said. "In his own way, not to your need, perhaps, your father loved you, no matter how superficial his emotions were towards others. Don't cast that out of your heart."

And he heard his own voice adding: "And I love you too, sweet, in a way that can perhaps meet your loneliness and your need."

She drew out of his arms, shaking her head. "No, Stark, you're sorry for me—because I cling to you and need you so terribly." Then she moved swiftly back into his embrace. "But just for a little while I'll pretend that you do *really* love me."

He hadn't meant to say what he had. Intuition had told her that, yet for the moment he couldn't let her go, and her lips were warm and tender under his own. Then he put her gently away from him.

"Get some sleep, baby, and be ready to face whatever we may have to face tomorrow."

Smiling dreamily she walked to the lounge and dropped down upon it, her head fell wearily back against pillow, and in a moment she was asleep. He covered her and went to his own room and flung himself fully clad on the bed, slept a little, awoke and read, smoked a cigarette and wished to high heaven he knew what the morrow would bring.

When the first ivory pallor glimmered in the eastern sky he roused the slumbering girl, poured hot coffee down her, and sent her out into the raw chill of the unawakened day.

"Drive home quickly, so that Mandura will believe you are just arriving, my sweet."

Shivering she stumbled drowsily to her car. "'Bye darling, see you later."

He went back to bed to give the day a decent opportunity to arrive, and to his consternation slept until after eleven. His first waking thought was of Eddie Dulin.

While he ate a hasty breakfast he asked himself what actually could have happened to the old man—if he wasn't off fishing somewhere. Had he been lured to a lonely spot—and killed? No one that he knew had seen him talking with Eddie, though he had learned that by the mysterious Mandura grapevine everything supposedly secret was known to all. *Wait a minute.* That silent figure watching from the manzanita thicket. Who had he been? Coburn? the Reverend Jerome? What occupation had the latter followed before he became a preacher? Not that he could conceive of Jerome being a murderer, yet he wished he could check into the man's past. There was something cold and secretive about him.

He set out for Eddie's. The day had advanced cool and colourless, promising nothing. Beyond the breaking surf a pale green sea heaved sluggishly. No smoke curled from the chimney of the fisherman's house. No one responded this time, either, to his loud and repeated knocking. He turned away with a grim sense of foreboding.

Jennie Grier was scrubbing the kitchen floor when he opened the door of his cottage. "Mind where you step now, Mr. Con-nister. My word! Don't you ever use an ashtray? Look at this floor."

"You ought to see Ford Coburn's floor, ashes to your knees. By the way, are you familiar, Jennie, with Eddie Dulin's habits?"

He didn't want to mention why he was worried and cause panic in the breast of his already terrified landlady, so he improvised a little. "Eddie was going to tumble and polish some agates for me. I can't find him about."

Jennie vigorously wrung her mop out the back door. "That shiftless old man is likely to be anywhere."

"Does he leave Mandura frequently?"

"Not any more. Eddie's getting on. Reverend Jerome picks up anything he needs extra at White Bay for him. I hope you don't swallow all those big fishing tales he peddles to visitors. My husband used to say that the oftener you told a story the fancier it got, and Eddie's are mighty fancy."

He laughed, but his throat felt dry. An oppressive premonition of danger seemed to pervade the day.

"I notice that both those big Dalquist cars are back at the Blue Tides this morning. How long do you think those women are going to stay down here, Mr. Connister?"

"Until the sheriff allows them to leave, I suppose. The funeral of Charles Dalquist was yesterday, you know."

Jennie said enviously: "Well, the owner of the Blue Tides is mighty lucky, having his cabin rented so long."

"You've had me, Jennie, such as I am."

"That's true, but my two other houses stand empty. And you'll be leaving before long."

"In another week, if Ridell will grant me my freedom."

She gazed at him earnestly. "I'll miss you, I certainly will. Winter's a long dreary time down here, shut in by storms and fog. It will never seem the same again since all this happened. Everything began—when that Spanish girl arrived."

His brows lifted. "Dolores? I suppose it did." It was true, until Dolores' arrival that Sunday evening there had been no hue and cry of terror at Cape Mandura. He turned to his closet and pulled out his fishing gear.

"Well, I'll leave you to your labours, Jennie. How would you like a nice five-foot trout for your dinner?"

"Big-talk Eddie," she scoffed.

He set out. A sombre question pushed its way into his mind: Was there *anything* in the life of that golden-skinned child which might have kindled the spark of murder? It was inconceivable. Dolores was as lucid and innocent as she appeared. He

had reached the rocks, when suddenly he swung about and headed for the Blue Tides.

Dolores opened the door to his knock, and his pulse skipped a beat. She was wearing a dreamy pale-blue affair of floating gauze, and it flashed to him that the suggestion of sultry passion slumbering in those dark luminous eyes, the smile hovering about that soft bright mouth—must surely have aroused men other than himself. He had witnessed her stormy passion of jealousy over Joanne . . . Had Dolores revealed *everything* about herself?

“Why, Stark . . .”

He realised then that he was standing there rigid in the doorway, searching the sensitive face with unsmiling intensity. He relaxed and stepped into the room. “I dropped by to see how you and Joanne were making out after your trip to town.”

She gave him a delicious secret smile and turned to call Joanne, but her stepmother was already there. She had changed after her journey into a black satin housecoat, which accentuated the lustreless pallor of her skin. All vitality seemed drained out of her, even her voice was dead.

She said without greeting, “They are certain I killed Charles. There was a plain-clothes man following us all the time we were in town. Sheriff Ridell has learned about Monte Kincaid—Rocky told them *lies*—about my going to a motel with Monte . . .” Her mouth twisted.

Connister offered her a cigarette and she accepted it with fingers that shook. In the flame from the lighter her eyes meeting his were opaque as cove water in shadow.

“Charles could be a beast, drive you *mad*, hover over women and smile when you were hurt.” Her voice was jerky. “He couldn’t belong to anyone—really. Yet he had me all tied up, no divorce or he would destroy me, because he’d built a big name for himself. He was too clever to ever allow anyone to know about *his* indiscretions. I took diversion—where I could. Monte is gay, good company . . .” She inhaled deeply on the cigarette. “But I didn’t kill Charles, or have him killed by Rocky, no matter what he says to save his own neck.”

She began to pace the floor, staring blindly into space. “Rocky was blackmailing me. He wanted me for himself again, and when he saw me with Monte—he got even in his own sweet

way. I know Roy. After I lit out and left him for Charles, I was terribly frightened. But he found other women fortunately. Then he began to hear about Charles growing more and more successful, and he looked me up again." Her voice rose to a cry: "Now see what he has done to me!"

Connister studied her intently. Was it an act? "They'd probably suspect you, Joanne, without Rocky's implicating you. Just knowing about Monte Kincaid. But that doesn't mean, of course . . ."

The jewelled eyes glittered furiously. "I told that stone-faced sheriff about Charles' other women friends, but all he said was that they had looked into that angle thoroughly." She crushed out her cigarette in a sea-shell with a vicious twist of the wrist. Then she swung about urgently to Connister. "*When* will they arrest me, Stark?"

"Joanne, I don't know that they will arrest you. I think they need more evidence to convict you, but I shouldn't hazard even a guess. If Rocky didn't kill your husband, *someone* did and attempted to murder others. We can't get around *that*."

He moved towards the door. "I'm going uptown, but I'll be back. Stay here quietly, both of you, and don't step outside."

Dolores watched him wistfully as he strode down the path. He turned, smiled at her and lifted his hand. Her yearning look went with him.

When he stepped into the post office he felt every muscle go taut. If Eddie hadn't vanished so abruptly and inexplicably he would never have thought seriously about his talk with Estes Regan. It could be days, however, before any reply from his letter to Oakland arrived. Nerved for disappointment he approached the window.

Mr. Sims, the postmaster, lifted his grizzled head. "Mail for you, Mr. Connister." He slid a flat grey envelope under the iron grille.

He sighed. "My partner up in Portland. He thinks it's high time I came home." The suspense must go on. He turned away.

"Wait a minute." The elderly man slipped another envelope under the grating.

Connister picked up a long white envelope and examined the postmark: OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA. A pulse throbbed suddenly in his temple. "Thanks, Mr. Sims." He thrust the letter into

an inside pocket and made his way out of the building to the boardwalk. He strode along the creaking, weathered planks speaking, nodding, to the villagers without seeing them.

When he reached the trail he glanced sharply about to be sure no one had followed him, and struck off down the steep track. He found himself walking through curtains of mist which had drifted in with the uncanny swiftness he had learned to associate with coastal weather.

Deep in the pines he stepped off the trail and dropped down on a fallen log. There was only the frailest cobweb of evidence to believe this letter could have any bearing whatever on the murder at Mandura—yet his fingers trembled a little as he ripped open the envelope.

There were six typewritten lines. He read them, passed a hand across his eyes, and read them a second, a *third* time.

At length he replaced the single sheet in the envelope and carefully returned it to his pocket. For an eternity he remained hunched there on the damp log, not smoking, just staring blindly into the mist, remembering words, fragments of conversation, fitting in bits here and there . . . Gradually out of chaos a grim pattern emerged.

A north wind was rising when he climbed to his feet. He could hear it far down the coast setting in motion the resistant branches of the pines as he strode on down the trail. His legs felt as though they were weighted with lead, and in his heart stirred a cold sick fear. He decided not to go back to the Blue Tides—just yet. His mind balked at what he had to think about.

The wind assailed him with sudden force, chill and inimical.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE GREY, DEAD HAND

IT HAD been a strange search. Those black signatures and the date scrawled in the yellowing pages of the old Lost Springs Lodge register burned in his brain with letters of fire—June 1939.

Jennie Grier had finished her cleaning and gone when he let himself into the cottage. He was thankful because he didn't feel up to talking just yet to anyone. He walked over and poked at the fire but there was a coldness within him which no flame could warm. Dully he heard the branches of the pines brushing against roof and wall, the heavy surge of the inflooding tide . . . Now he knew why he had been in danger, and why—he was *still* in danger.

The essential, the pressingly urgent thing was that he find the bloodstained clothing, material proof for Ridell. Now he felt that he knew where they were.

He hunted up his flashlight, dug out the piece of iron pipe he'd kept handy in a kitchen drawer, and slipped them inside his blazer. This time he was not deluded. The murderer he was seeking to trap was devious, clever—and unbelievably vicious.

His scalp prickled when he thought how close to death Dolores had been ever since that first assault—which she had definitely not imagined. Fear for her dried the saliva in his mouth, set his heart hammering against the cage of his ribs.

He closed the cottage door and struck out swiftly. The fog was not yet thick. It lay in stratas, clammy, cold on the eyeballs, white and obliterating until the wind swirled it like smoke. Above him on the dark slopes of the mountain the blanched stumps of trees felled long ago, stood out pale like scattered tombstones in the agate-coloured light. It was like a grim omen.

As he strode past his landlady's house he could see her bent head in the window, the yellow glow of the kitchen light behind her. It was a heart-warming sight in the bleak, half dusk. The faintest aroma of frying bacon drifted out to him. Amber light glowed also behind the drawn curtains of the Blue Tides. *Dolores*. He felt the impulse to stop and take her with him, but knew he would go more swiftly alone. Pray heaven she would be safe until his return.

The sullen shadows of the woods smelling of damp leaves and rotting logs received him. Twisted pines bent towards him as though with sinister intent. He left the dead-end road and mounted the steep trail as rapidly as stones and bracken would allow. Studying the trees he measured the distance as he climbed.

At length the sagging, vine-burdened roof of the haunted lodge reared into view among mist-hung boughs. Haunted it surely was. The glassless windows stared blindly down upon him, and he thought of the gloomy, cobwebbed chambers behind them with a thrill of horror. What secrets those decaying walls had harboured during the long years.

Where the tangling blackberry vines began he came to a halt, then began a slow careful search of the surrounding territory, moving away from the trail, studying the ground as he approached the old buildings, avoiding twisted masses of vine, for if the clothing had been concealed among them, the murderer would surely bear scars from the wicked spines. He'd like to use his flash for the dimness was increasing though it was only mid-afternoon, but it could be dangerous.

Here and there the earth was broken into black eruptions of rock. Whenever he came to a mound of them he knocked it apart. Urgency of time goaded him, and he felt tension mounting unbearably within him.

After nearly forty minutes he straightened wearily, fighting panic. He couldn't waste another moment searching—not with this knowledge perilously lodged in his brain. At any moment further horror could fall upon the village.

Desperately he thought of the dank cellars beneath the old hotel, of all the musty closets, the cupboards, the odd nooks black with dust—and he groaned. It was searching for a needle in a haystack. Ridell's men had been there before him, officers experienced in raking up evidence. And they had no real reason, any

of them, to assume the articles were there—only suspicion. Yet without the clothing he had no proof at all to approach the murderer.

Black wings of fear beat against him—fear for old Eddie, for Dolores . . . The pressure was too great, he spun around and headed back towards the trail. A branch grazed his cheek and he shoved it aside, bent to avoid another—and froze.

A cluster of small objects lay scattered almost under his feet. He knelt and carefully scraped them into his hand. His heart began to hammer again. Jerking the pack of cigarettes from his pocket he knocked out the cigarettes and carefully stowed the objects in the empty pack.

With grim haste then he began to search again, kicking apart the black clumps of rock, groping under fallen logs, pushing the brown lace of bracken aside, battling panic and despair. At a gnarled cluster of pine he paused and prodded at their knobby roots with his foot. The stones and small boulders half burying them fell apart as though unembedded. He dropped to his knees. The earth beneath the stones was soft and loose. Feverishly he dug down into the damp soil under a wiry network of roots, thrust his fingers far in—and encountered an alien object, the unmistakable mesh of cloth.

He climbed to his feet, glanced over his shoulder into the curtaining mist and listened. He could hear only the heavy boom of waters in the Chasm, moisture dripping from nearby leaves . . . Bending down he grasped his find and drew forth a bundle wrapped in a striped blue beach towel. His hands shook as he unfolded it. A pair of tan denim pants lay revealed. A dark red substance was clotted upon them. Rolled in the pants was a grey sweater, a pair of black sailcloth beach shoes gummy with blood. From one heel a fragment of rubber was missing. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

Time was thundering in his ears. He shoved the stones back into place. Death could be close at hand on any side. With the grisly bundle gripped under one arm he moved stealthily down through the grappling branches, bracing himself for the dreadful ordeal ahead. He dared not wait to get to Ridell. His blood congealed when he thought how heedless, how trusting he had been. Rocky Nelson's criminal activities had side-tracked them all—to the miraculous advantage of the murderer.

✕ He saw himself idly lounging along the beaches, fishing, picking up shells—while death hovered near. Peril had accompanied his every movement. The murderer had merely awaited the right moment—the safe moment to strike. He broke into a run.

The scream, under the dull pounding of the breakers, sounded bird-thin and far away. Paralysing horror rooted him in his tracks. The cry came again, faint, but so pierced with terror his breath was suspended. *Dolores?* He wrenched free from the chains that bound him and plunged down through the trees, slashing at the clawing branches, stumbling over snaky roots, crashing down the hillside in a deepening nightmare of fog.

Something struck him with violence in the chest, and he realised he had lunged into a tree. It brought him sharply to his senses. He took bearings as well as he could, listening in an agony of foreboding, the blood hammering in his temples, for the terrible cry to be repeated. The silence was more dreadful.

It might not have been Dolores. It could have been Mrs. Jerome, Jennie Grier . . . He could almost swear it had been a woman, yet at that distance . . .

He headed towards the roar of the breakers, through a whiteness that filled his throat and held the stillness, the coldness of death. Suddenly the trail was under his feet.

An eternity later a diffused saffron glow of lamps lighted against the fog shimmered through the trees, and he felt certain that heart-stopping scream had come from the cliffs. He swung about and searched until he found a mound of rocks, dug beneath them and shoved the bundle of clothing out of sight, marking the spot in his memory. It had taken only a couple of minutes yet it seemed an age before he stumbled back to the trail and sped on, his feet leaden as though they were ploughing through sand.

The fog was blowing again now, here and there lifting its gauzy curtains to reveal dark dripping trees, then folding down again. He glimpsed the rim of the cliff just ahead, skeleton branches hovering on the edge of space. Out of the eerie veils perhaps a hundred feet ahead of him, a human figure suddenly materialised. It was kneeling on the cliff's perilous verge.

"*Dolores!*" he shouted.

Then he saw . . . The figure was staring down with ghoulisht intentness into the abyss of white.

Gathering every ounce of strength he possessed he headed for that kneeling form, reached it, and with gigantic fury hurled himself upon it, battering it to earth. There was a stifled gasp, a groan, and the body beneath his own suddenly went limp.

He flung himself away from the inert form and crept cautiously to the broken ledge of the cliff. Steeling himself he gazed down, straining to penetrate the winding sheets of mist to the seething cauldron far below.

"God, *no!*"

Far down on the glistening black bench of rock lay a crumpled figure, motionless in a swirl of pale blue gauze.

From a vast distance voices reached him. Others too had heard that terrible cry. He needed help, needed it desperately. A star on a dark coat flashed silver in the dimness near him. Then a beam of light cut the mists and encircled him. Men's feet pounded through the bracken.

"Connister?" It was Ridell's urgent voice.

He was already on his feet, forcing his shaking limbs into action. "She's down there," the words were torn from his throat, "lying on the rocks—like her father—*dead*. And this," he indicated the sprawled figure at his feet, "is the devil who—did it. I've found all—the evidence we need. I've got to get down to *her* . . ."

Skidding, half falling, he started down the steep trail to the rocks. Behind him the quick steps of the sheriff's men descended in a cascade of rolling stones as he went.

Like Charles Dalquist, his daughter lay in a crumbled bed of yellow clay. The blue shadow of death veiled the still face upturned to the sheriff's light. Vaguely Connister heard Ridell swear under his breath.

"Don't touch her, Connister, she may still be alive. This isn't the place her father went over. It's lower here."

He felt no hope. "If it had only—dawned on me before . . ." His voice was ragged, empty, "she could have been saved. I didn't suspect until . . ."

"Is the murderer up there on the cliff with Scott, dead?"

"I hope not. A quick death would be too—merciful."

Connister stood alone in the dark road and watched the white ambulance carefully negotiate the sharp, steep curves up to the highway, and vanish among the ghostly pines. There was nothing

he could do for her now, *nothing at all*. She had gone down alone—without knowing that he loved her.

He swung savagely towards the Blue Tides.

A little knot of villagers were trying to crowd into the log building. State Troopers were pressing them back. The scene was unreal: Police cars, their top-lights flashing red, the shocked yet avid faces of the people—the Grey People—pallid in the pitiless glare of police spotlights—and the fog threatening to submerge them all in its nebulous depths. One of the uniformed men beckoned to him.

"The sheriff wants to see you, Mr. Connister." He cleared a way for him through the muttering throng.

Another trooper admitted him to the living-room. Suffocating heat from a roaring fire enveloped him. A single lamp was burning, the rest of the room beyond the yellow glare of the fire lay steeped in shadow.

Joanne Dalquist lay on the davenport rigid under the flare of light. Between the pale-gold wings of hair her face was ashen. She wore a black travelling suit, and she was pressing a handkerchief to her lips. She tore it away from a white twitching mouth as he entered, and looked up at him with glazed eyes.

"Dolores—is she—dead?"

He said harshly: "I think so."

The trooper nodded towards Joanne. "We intercepted Mrs. Dalquist's car at Rockport. She was trying to make a get-away."

The woman's eyes glittered like green ice. "They were going to arrest me."

Scott appeared in a doorway. "This way, please, Mr. Connister."

Connister followed him into a narrow passage to a closed door. As he stood before that door, Scott's hand on the latch, he knew that entering the room beyond was going to be one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do in his life. Grimly he followed the young deputy.

Ridell was standing beside a white nightstand, eyes watchful. In a blue wing-chair under the lamp was hunched a silent figure. On the sapphire brocade bedspread lay the bloodstained clothing Connister had found.

It occurred to him that ironically enough this must be Joanne's bedroom. The provocative fragrance of the rich perfume

she loved pervaded the air. A shimmering lilac robe was flung across a chair, the dresser top was cluttered with coloured crystal bottles. He almost stepped on a pink satin slipper. A strange setting for the final scene of this murder drama.

Ridell said: "You were right, Connister, that chunk of rubber did come from a beach shoe. It's about as conclusive evidence as we need, finding it where you did."

"How did you happen to get here—again at a time—of *crisis*, Ridell?"

"We found a letter—hidden in Dalquist's luggage down here, a mysterious letter. It set us on the right track." He indicated the rigid figure in the blue chair. "But we don't entirely comprehend the motive."

"I think I can clear that up," Connister told him. For the first time he turned his eyes on the face of the prisoner, hard, dangerous eyes. "And this—this—murderer can fill in the gaps."

His words came swiftly: "As you know I'm in Real Estate. Old properties like Lost Springs Lodge interest me. I wondered about the people who had once been guests there. Then it flashed to me that I'd noticed a cream pitcher lettered Lost Spring Lodge in one of the homes in Mandura. It was hardly a hunch, but I drifted up and talked to Keeney. He set me on to Eddie Dulin."

He stopped abruptly, motioned to Ridell and strode from the room. Ridell followed him and Connister told him about Eddie. "I'm seriously alarmed about him, now, Sheriff. Eddie disappeared immediately after our talk. I'm fearful of what may have happened to him."

"Why didn't you tell me at the time?" Ridell demanded sharply.

"I did tell you, but I had nothing then to base my suspicions on. It's quite different now."

Ridell wheeled and strode out to the trooper in the living-room; when he returned he motioned to Connister back to the other room. "We'll get a search under way. In the meantime finish your story."

X The crouching figure in the wing-chair had not moved, but Scott stood alertly on guard.

Connister went quickly on: "Eddie put me on to the former manager of the hotel, Estes Regan. Eddie hinted that someone

who might know something had once been a guest of the lodge. I hunted up Regan and we made a search through the hotel registers which he had stored at his place. We *did* find something, but it turned out that old Eddie had been misleading me."

"Misleading you? Then why should you think he's—in danger?"

"Let me clarify it this way: Twenty-three years ago, two guests checked in at Lost Springs Lodge. They remained two weeks, probably hiking, wandering the beaches, watching the surf crashing into the Chasm of the Stone Woman. Those two weeks were probably the happiest one of those two persons had ever known—or would ever know again. Yet during those June days the seeds of murder were sown."

He took a deep breath. "Old Eddie was misleading me, because one name in that register, well, we recognised it all right, but that person—*was dead*."

"Dead?"

"He had been murdered."

Ridell started and Scott lifted his blond head. "*Dalquist!*"

There was a spasmodic movement from the figure in the wing-chair.

"That was what old Eddie meant. It was a kind of gruesome joke, because he didn't know the other person. Yet it gave me a clue to the truth. The guests who signed that register were Mr. and Mrs. Charles Dalquist."

Ridell snapped his fingers. "Of course."

"Who," went on Connister, "was *Mrs.* Dalquist, I asked myself? I had only one thing on which to go. Dalquist had given Oakland, California, as their place of residence. I sent a registered letter to the County Clerk at Oakland asking him to check the marriage licences issued in June 1939, to see if a Charles Dalquist had taken out a licence—for I suspected that the Lost Springs visit had been a honeymoon."

He thrust his hands hard into his blazer pockets and kept his eyes on Ridell. "Twenty-three years ago in Oakland, Charles Dalquist married a woman whose name was Harmon."

"It falls into place," cried Ridell.

"Yes. She was twenty-five years old, probably a pale, plain girl, but she had a little money left her by her parents . . ."

The figure in the chair reared up. "*A little money?*" The

voice shrilled venomously at them. "Fifty thousand dollars. Curse him, he went through every penny of it. I sent him to law college, I gave him everything on God's earth he wanted, cars, travel, a fine house . . ." Abruptly the voice fell silent.

"So you see," said Connister, "Mandura was not an unknown place to this woman when later she came here to live. It was because of the past that she sought the town. I suspect she divorced Dalquist and changed her name. I would guess that . . ."

"You don't have to guess, I'll tell you." The woman's tone was chilling. She gripped the arms of her chair with animal strength, staring with glazed eyes into the shadowy past.

"He always considered himself superior to me. He was so polished, and after he passed his bar examinations—thanks to my money—he was ashamed of me. I began to see him with other women. Then I learned about *this* one, this special one . . ."

Hours, days, years of sombre brooding throbbed in the harsh voice: "When I found out about this black-eyed Spanish wanton she had—already," her voice shook, "given birth to his child—two years before. I confronted him with the truth. He was ugly. He threatened to have me committed to an insane asylum if I caused any publicity. He had control of all my money by then, and he managed a divorce, *stripped me of everything*, and married the Spanish woman. They left California and moved to Willamette City."

She sprang to her feet, a wild, dishevelled figure in her crumpled brown slacks and orange sweater, mouth twitching as she relived the past again. "I went far away—to Chicago because I was horribly afraid of him. I took my middle name, found work as a Librarian, but I subscribed to the Willamette City paper, and I knew when he married for the third time, and how rich and successful he was growing—because of my money—while I struggled for a living, and starved in a lonely room."

"Yet you saved enough money to come back to Mandura and purchase cottages," Connister cut in, and she turned eyes upon him so blinded with fury they failed to see him.

"Yes, I did, I scraped and saved and went without meals, but I bought the cottages and I did all right until the tourist busi-

ness fell off because of the rainy weather the last two summers, and I couldn't meet my mortgage payments. I wrote to him. I asked him very politely for help. I was so desperate I was no longer afraid of him, and I hinted that he'd better pay attention. He understood all right. Being a lawyer he knew better than put anything in writing, so he came right down here."

She began to pace the floor, thrusting hard thin fingers feverishly through her grey hair. Scott's pencil hovered above his notebook. Ridell and Connister exchanged glances.

"Go on," the sheriff ordered quietly.

"Charles was too smart to come to my house, but when I walked out he met me for just a few minutes. He knew me right away, though I've changed." She gave a mirthless laugh. "I had taken my glasses off."

Connister felt chills crawling down his spine as the terrible voice continued: "Charles said to me, 'Keep away from me, Jennifer, I'm warning you. I will give you no money, and I will surely have you declared insane this time, for I am very certain that you are and always have been.' Those were his very words."

She swung about, stumbled to the chair and sank into it, dropping her head in shaking hands.

Ridell's voice was soft. "How did you get your former husband over the cliff? Did he fall by accident, or . . .?"

She looked up with a triumphant smile. The heavily rouged mouth gleamed shockingly vivid against her blanched cheeks. "I waited my chance, and it was simple: I took my berry pail and walked up the trail past the Blue Tides. While I picked berries near the hotel I could look down and watch the place. I saw that half-Spanish girl of his come out and go away with Stark Connister. I didn't wait a minute. I dashed down to the cabin and knocked on the door. When he opened it I shouted to him—that his daughter had *fallen over the cliff*."

In horrified silence the three men stared at her. It had been as simple as that.

"Charles rushed out and I led the way to the very edge and I pointed down. When he leaned and looked over—all I had to do was shove him—*hard*. He was so surprised he didn't even cry out."

She broke into silent laughter. Abruptly it died away and she

stared at them in sudden terror. "Then I was afraid he hadn't been killed by the fall, and that he'd live and betray me. I scrambled down the cliff where it was lower. If I'd gone the other way someone might have seen me. I took a rock and I just battered and *battered* . . ." the voice rose.

"That's enough," shouted Ridell. "We know the horrible thing you did. Afterwards, what did you do?"

The glare died out of the wild eyes and the panting breath subsided. "I ran down the beach and climbed up the cliff and came home. I saw then I was covered with his blood. I changed my clothes and my shoes and wrapped them in a towel and hid them."

"Where did you hide them?" Ridell demanded.

"In a hole in the back of my refrigerator."

"Your *refrigerator*?"

"I pulled the box out from the wall, shoved the bundle in and pushed it back. Afterwards I took my pail of berries and went back into the hills. I knew I had to get those stained clothes out of my house though, and I was afraid to burn them. I kept trying to find a time to get out and bury them. Finally I thought it was safe and I took the berry pail again, so no one would suspect, but that criminal accomplice of Rocky Nelson's came lunging out of the bushes and knocked me out. I had already hidden the clothes, and was going to start back as soon as I had enough berries to avoid suspicion. I thought it was Stark Connister and he'd been watching me. I never trusted him, not for one minute. He was spying on me all the time for Charles. I know he was."

Connister drew the empty cigarette pack from his pocket and handed it to Ridell. "This is why I suspected that the stained clothing was near the place where Larkin James struck her."

Ridell tore it open. "Blackberries."

"Yes. That was after I had secured my information from Oakland and had tied Lost Springs Lodge, the Stone Woman, and the blackberries together. They spelled the name of the murderer."

The sheriff strode across the room and stood over the brooding woman. "But why did you want to kill an innocent young girl? Why did you attack Stark Connister?"

Her baleful gaze met his. "That Spanish woman's blood is in

Dolores Dalquist. She's Mercedes' child, illegitimate. If I killed her that would have shown him I wasn't fooling, and I wanted to hurt him—*dreadfully*."

"But he never would have helped you if you'd killed his child," Connister cried. He was shaking. "What kind of mad reasoning . . ." Abruptly he stopped. "And you were afraid I suspected something?"

"I knew you were up to something. If it hadn't been for you I'd have managed to destroy that Spanish girl before now. She ruined my life. Her blood is evil."

Before now. The words jerked Connister back to the fearful question: Was Dolores alive? "I'm going to the hospital," he said unsteadily to Ridell. But another question floated to the dark surface of his mind.

"What did the Stone Woman have to do with all this? Something I'm sure."

Jennie Grier whipped off the heavy glasses, and they saw a face they had not suspected was hidden behind them, a face whose hardness the heavy lenses had disguised. The blue eyes were stonily bright, yet a trace of good looks still remained. She might have possessed a faint charm before the acid of bitterness corroded her heart. The grey, dead hand of the past was heavy upon her as she said softly:

"Charles and I made vows to the Stone Woman," her lips writhed. "We wrote vows of love and loyalty on slips of paper and tossed them into her Chasm. Charles laughed when he threw his slip into the waters. *I remembered always that he laughed.* But the Stone Woman punished him at last. I meant to offer him to her as a sacrifice. All these years I've promised her I would. And the Stone Woman would have had his child—just now—if Stark Connister hadn't stopped me on the cliff. I was going down and roll her in . . ."

Connister lunged at the woman, but Scott sprang between them. The angular body suddenly sagged in the chair. "It might never have happened, any of it, except for the fog. It was my friend, it drifted in to hide me . . ."

Ridell had one more grim question: "How did you get Dolores to the cliff's edge?"

She gave a soft chilling laugh. "When I saw Charles' third wife, that mushroom-white woman Joanne, drive away, I knew

the girl was all alone. I rushed in and I screamed at her—that *Stark Connister had fallen over the cliff.*"

With an iron hand Connister gripped the door knob. "The Stone Woman of Mandura," he said, "is Jennie Grier."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

ITS DELIGHT IS MURDER

SHERIFF RIDELL'S voice and manner abruptly underwent a change. His features darkened. "And now," he demanded of the woman, "where is Eddie Dulin?"

She passed a vague hand across her face. "Eddie? How should I know where he is?"

"Because he suspected something, and told Stark Connister that he did. Immediately afterwards he disappeared. Did you kill him?"

Jennifer Grier sat motionless, staring with narrowed gaze into the distorted memories of her yesterdays. "I saw Stark Connister—up there with Eddie. I stood by the manzanita and watched. Yes, I know where Eddie is," she admitted softly.

Connister's blood turned to ice. This was his landlady, the woman with whom he had joked and conversed every day for nearly a month, who had quoted her husband's words so many times. Death had been walking at his side, and at Dolores' side; death had smiled across the tea-table at him, and while he strode about seeking a strange murderer. Now harmless old Eddie . . .

Ridell repeated with iron insistence, "Where is Eddie?"

The rouged lips twisted in a dreadful smile. "I can take you to—where he is."

Connister read his own grim thoughts reflected in the sheriff's hazel gaze as he motioned the woman to her feet. She shook off Scott's hand on her arm. "I won't run away. I've done what I planned to do, what should have been done. Charles will never deceive another woman. He'll never bury me in any insane asylum. His black-eyed daughter—who destroyed my life, will never ruin any other lives. And Eddie—well, I'll take you to him."

Ridell motioned her roughly towards the door. "Show us where he is."

When they passed into the living-room Joanne sprang to her feet staring, both hands pressed to her cheeks. Charles Dalquist's wives gazed at each other.

The troopers cleared a way through the villagers, who still lingered about waiting with the subdued, unnerving patience of the Grey People. Jennie Grier did not see her neighbours at all; her gaze penetrated the fog and was turned to the cliffs.

Connister had to see it through although every instinct in him revolted against it.

The gaunt woman led them down through the chill wet beach grass to the shore, then swiftly across the sand to the rocks, and over their slippery surfaces until the surging waters in the Chasm of the Stone Woman thundered in their ears.

"He can't be down there—*alive*," Ridell shouted to her, but like a zombi she moved ahead.

"There's a cave." Her voice floated eerily back to them.

Connister turned sick. Just beyond, those treacherous black rocks still glistened crimson with Dolores' blood. He struggled for control and halted. If old Eddie Dulin were in one of those cold, sea-washed caverns—*he was not a living man*.

Ridell and the deputy halted also, undoubtedly sharing his thoughts. In that instant Jennie Grier, taut limbs suddenly released like powerful springs, broke free from Scott's restraining grasp and went loping over the rocks.

With a shout Scott plunged after her, Ridell hard on his heels.

"There's no place she can go," Connister said.

"The trail beyond the Chasm," Ridell flung over his shoulder. "And in this fog . . ."

Connister too broke into a run. They moved through an unearthly dusk of blue and luminous vapours, which now and again drifted aside to reveal a flying figure with wind-blown hair. Icy spume from the crashing waves stung Connister's face, but his clenched hands were slippery with perspiration. The mists floated apart again and for an instant he glimpsed the angular body of the woman edging awkwardly about the Chasm's mouth. It flashed to him that her wild thought had been that in their reckless pursuit of her they might plunge into the cauldron.

For an instant he thought the harsh scream which rent the wind was the cry of a gull swooping to the shore. Then he recognised it for a human voice. The orange sweater vanished behind a white-crested wall of breakers.

Slowly, warily, he made his way to the spot where Ridell and Scott were standing frozen, staring down into the churning, foaming maelstrom of water. The awesome crash of logs battering the rock walls of the Chasm deafened their ears. Connister thought he glimpsed a streak of orange swirling beneath the logs.

"There's nothing we can do," cried Scott, and Ridell nodded. Connister turned his eyes away and lifted them to the Stone Woman. In the eerie half-light the great rock face gleamed with a blue lustre through the gossamers of mist. Was there a faint smile hovering about the dark lips? The Stone Woman of Mandura had claimed another sacrifice.

Shaken, he stumbled away and felt Ridell's hard body at his side. "There's still old Eddie, and time is running out. The woman must have been insane."

Connister did not believe Jennie was insane. Victim of a terrible obsession, yes, with delusional moments, yet sane enough to contrive a long yearned-for revenge.

The bleak echoing caverns which burrowed under the cliffs were devoid of human life. Drenched and shivering Connister motioned to Ridell. "I'm leaving for White Bay and the hospital. I've got to know about Dolores."

The other nodded. "I'll get more men into a search for Eddie, and to try for Mrs. Grier's body. We can't do anything more without searchlights."

Doctor Bishop said: "The girl realised she was going over the cliff, that was evident because ferns from the cliff were clutched in her hands and she was bruised and cut from grasping at roots and rock ledges as she went down. Also, the fact that you heard her scream indicated that she was aware and suspected the woman's terrible intention—when it was too late."

The physician straightened and gazed across the slight, motionless figure in the narrow white bed at Connister. "Due to the fact that she did know she attempted to save herself and the fall was not a direct plunge—as her father's was. That is why,"

he drew a long exhausted breath, "we've been able to pull her through."

Connister gazed down at the face on the pillow, bloodless under its gold. It hurt him to breathe, so terrific had the suspense been, not knowing whether she would live or not.

He gave a great start. Dark melting eyes were looking into his. He leaned over her. "Baby, you're going to get well, and from now on," his voice grew husky, "until eternity, I hope, you'll never be alone again. I'll be right there at your side." He leaned over and pressed the white lips tenderly with his own.

The wraith of a smile curved the lovely mouth.

They were all gathered in the Jerome living-room a few hours later, shocked and silent. Mrs. Jerome moved among them with the coffee pot, and the coffee's reviving aroma mingled with the down-to-earth smell of stove oil.

In the silvery lamplight the faces looked haggard, drained of colour: Joanne, Ford Coburn, Reverend Jerome, Connister, Sheriff Ridell. A north-west wind beat against the house, a tide of sound surging over roof and wall, sweeping draperies of fog across the black polished windows. Joanne edged closer to the grateful warmth of the fire.

The sheriff accepted a cup of coffee from the minister's wife. There were heavy lines of fatigue etched about his handsome mouth. "Thank you, Mrs. Jerome, this is just what I need. I'll be on my way in a few minutes."

Looking more than ever like a wan spirit from another world, in her grey-patterned gown Mrs. Jerome repeated for the tenth time in a dazed way: "*Jennie Grier, Jennie . . .* I never would have believed it, never, never. She talked so much about her husband, as though he were *dead*. She allowed us to believe she was a widow. Oh, I hope and pray you will find Mr. Eddie Dulin soon, Sheriff."

"We've searched every place we can think of," Ridell assured her bleakly. "And we're not overlooking the possibility that he could be in the ocean, though it seems unlikely. The boys are still searching."

Connister turned to him. "How did you ever overlook a letter so important it made you begin to suspect Mrs. Grier, Sheriff?"

"It was cleverly hidden. The Willamette City police went

through his papers up there, but the letter was down here—pasted in a secret lining in his suitcase. That naturally aroused our suspicions. It was a threatening letter she wrote, but carefully worded; she was an educated woman. If Dalquist had curbed his anger and given her money he might be alive today. The letter provided us with a possible motive for murder. It was signed Jennifer Grier Harmon, which was not the way Mrs. Grier signed her papers, nor the name anyone knew her by. It also hinted at blackmail and some tie-in with the past. But we didn't suspect she had been Charles Dalquist's wife."

"Neither did I," admitted Connister, "even when I saw the name in the register, because of course, it was merely written Mr. and Mrs. Dalquist. It must have been poor old Eddie's idea of a macabre joke—because Dalquist was dead. More than likely he didn't remember the lawyer until after his murder. I felt I had to know who Dalquist's bride had been, if the visit to the Lodge had been a honeymoon. When the marriage licence bureau in Oakland gave her name as Jennifer Grier Harmon, *then* I knew, of course. I also knew that Dolores had not been mistaken when she thought someone tried to shove her into the Chasm."

"After Dalquist received that letter," Ridell put in, "he came down here as fast as he could to silence the woman—an abandoned, half-crazed wife he'd stripped of her fortune, and who knew that his daughter was . . ."

He stopped, glanced at Connister, and did not complete the sentence. "I see no reason," he said, "why the girl should ever know these details."

"There's every reason why she should know everything," Mrs. Jerome cried with surprising spirit. "Or she will hear it whispered the rest of her life. It's all in the past and the child is as innocent as an angel. I thank the good Lord who spared her young life."

Connister suddenly loved the woman. The ghost was flesh and blood after all and possessed a heart. She was a kindly person, even though in mistaken friendliness she had frightened Dolores with the gift of the Black Warning dahlias.

Ford Coburn shifted in his chair and quoted solemnly: "Revenge is barren of itself; itself is the dreadful food it feeds upon: its delight is murder; its satiety despair.—Schiller."

Joanne had been sitting, spent and pallid, like one reprieved

from death. She suddenly stirred. "*Charles' wife*—that gaunt, grotesque creature, that *Grier woman* . . ." Incredulously she stared from face to face. "No wonder he didn't want anyone to find out . . . But whose face," she demanded suddenly, "did I see at the window the night Stark dined with us?"

Reverend Jerome gave a start and his face crimsoned. "I'm afraid it was I, Mrs. Dalquist. I—I was looking for Mr. Connister. It seemed to me that I was being very seriously suspected. I was going to knock then changed my mind and hurried home."

"You were being seriously suspected." Ridell climbed tiredly to his feet. "Each one of you were. And where actually were you, by the way, the night of the murder, Jerome?"

"Exactly where I told you I was, trying to pay a visit to my fisherman friend in White Bay. I allowed Evelyn to believe I planned to see the dentist, which was wrong, but she doesn't approve of Chris. He chews tobacco, and his language is—somewhat lurid."

Joanne cried bitterly: "You see, Sheriff, I was telling the truth about forgetting my beach shoes on the highway."

"The story sounded highly implausible," Ridell said dryly, "yet the truth often does."

"Will Larkin James recover?" Connister asked.

"He'll recover, but he'll never walk right again, and he'll go to prison."

"I even suspected the kid, Healy Riggs, Sheriff."

Ridell nodded. "We did also. Healy was guilty of lying to cover up for Rocky any number of times, but he had no idea his employer was engaged in criminal activities. It taught the boy a lesson."

Above the surge of the wind a sudden murmur of voices came to them. It was accompanied by the hard tread of footsteps. Ridell was at the door before anyone could move. He flung it open, and Mrs. Jerome gave a faint scream.

Two State Troopers stepped into the room. Between them they supported a scrawny dishevelled figure in shapeless dungarees and soiled windbreaker. Faded blue eyes blinked in the lamplight, gnarled fingers clawed nervously at scanty white hair.

"Great fish-hooks! What's all the commotion about anyhow? I didn't mean no harm."

"Eddie!" Connister gave a great shout of joy. "You old sea-dog. Thank God!" He strode over and shook the old man by his thin shoulders.

One of the troopers, a dark young man, addressed Ridell: "We found him, sir, skulking along Kaneah Canyon."

Mrs. Jerome hurried to the shrivelled little man with a cup of steaming coffee. "Please sit down, you poor, poor man, we thought you were . . ."

"Thank ye, Mam." Eddie settled into the chair she pushed forward, and under all their anxious eyes expanded with a kind of pleased pride. "Right after this Connister feller talked to me," he confided, "and I told him about somebody down here—could tell him something . . ."

He shuffled his feet in sudden embarrassment. "Well, I was kind of foolin' in a gruesome way. I didn't remember Mr. Dalquist until after he was done in. I'd taken him on fishin' trips years ago up White Bay, him and his new wife—that the boys here says was Jennie Grier. I never recognised her all these years. She didn't wear glasses then when they was honeymoonin'."

He took an eager gulp of coffee, gazing at the sheriff ruefully. "After Connister left I done some worryin'—thinkin' someone might of overheard me—and I think they did. For pretty soon Jennie Grier dropped by to see how my fishin' was. She'd never come near me before or hardly spoke to me, but she kept askin' questions about what Connister wanted, and what we talked about."

He twisted his shoulders uncomfortably. "She invited me down to her house for supper, said she had some nice blackberry wine, and was so simperin' sweet all of a sudden I says to myself: 'Eddie, you old fool, everybody around here is gettin' killed or knocked over the head. You been shootin' off your mouth, and what little you know might add up to something important to *somebody*.' So I jest up and lit out and beat it up to Fen Hawkins' shack in the Canyon. Been holin' up there. But the State boys come along . . ." he turned to glare at the smiling officers, "and they asked Hawkins did he see Eddie Dulin, and by the great whales, after they left my pal, Fen said I was wanted by the police—and he turned me out."

He shook his head wrathfully. "And Jennie Grier used to be

Mr. Dalquist's wife and murdered him. Women sure got long memories. Likely that blackberry wine was poisoned."

Ridell said softly: "It could have been, and if you had not run away, Eddie, you might not be here—a living man in this room tonight."

It was over. Connister moved to the door, and the Reverend Jerome stepped up to him. His agate eyes were shining.

"Mr. Connister, you might be interested to know that I—have accepted the pastorate of a small church at Port Nare. I have been slipping up there now and then helping conduct services. They appear to need me, and I have come to the conclusion since all these terrible happenings, that after all, the world needs what slight influence I may have to help make it a better place."

"Good for you, Jerome, that's *fine*. Mrs. Jerome will be pleased."

"It is not easy, Mr. Connister, to live with a woman—when she is not."

Coburn reared to his feet. "I'll see you home," he said to Joanne, as the sheriff and the State Troopers escorted old Eddie out. Joanne nodded smiling and accepted the arm he offered.

Connister stepped out into the wind and the blowing fog, and they suited his mood. Gratefully he inhaled deeply the keen salt air. He was glad to be alone, for a sudden depression weighed his spirits. His eyes lifted to those shrouded hills where the ruined walls of Lost Springs Lodge, brooded silent among the autumn trees. He saw two figures strolling hand-in-hand along the great veranda in flooding June sunlight, the man, handsome, insouciant, the woman, too slender, eager . . . He glimpsed them in the dining-hall smiling across the flowers at each other.

And he saw them again poised on the edge of the awesome Chasm of the Stone Woman tossing fateful slips of paper scribbled with their vows into the churning green waters; white leaves irrevocably sealing their doom as they fluttered down. The enchanted laughter of Jennifer Dalquist drifted faintly down the winds of time to him.

He returned to the present, beholding a bitter, desperate woman staring from her lonely windows out to the desolate grey wastes of the Pacific. He could feel the acid of grief eating deep into her heart, the dreadful fury growing . . .

Money she had needed desperately, yes. Yet she had not killed her bridegroom of long ago—for money. Her financial need had merely kindled the spark. The fog had drifted in—opportunity had presented itself—and she had killed for love. ‘Revenge—the dreadful food it feeds upon.’

The Grey People gathered in their lowly, mist-bound homes tonight, had incredible and dramatic happenings on which to meditate. But in Jennie Grier’s window no lamp burned.

Dolores was waiting; his steps quickened.

THE END

